Owari no Chronicle Volume2

source : https://www.baka-tsuki.org/project/index.php?title=Owari_no_Chronicle:Volume2

AHEADシリーズ

終わりのクロニクル①〈下〉

祖父の遺言により、10個の異世界との戦後交渉を任された佐山御言。この交渉に成功し10個の概念を解放すれば、マイナス概念の加速で滅びようとしている自分たちの世界が助かるという。佐山は、この交渉権を本当に引き受けて良いものか迷いながらも、一個目の異世界1st-Gとの戦闘に巻き込まれていく……。

10個あると言われる概念世界と、この「世界」の間に過去何が起こったのか。現代にまで残された遺恨を解消し、佐山は無事1st-Gとの“全竜交渉”を果たすことができるのか――!?

「AHEADシリーズ」第1話、完結！

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AHEADシリーズ
終わりのクロニクル①〈下〉
川上稔
電撃文庫
¥730

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¥
730

9784840224079

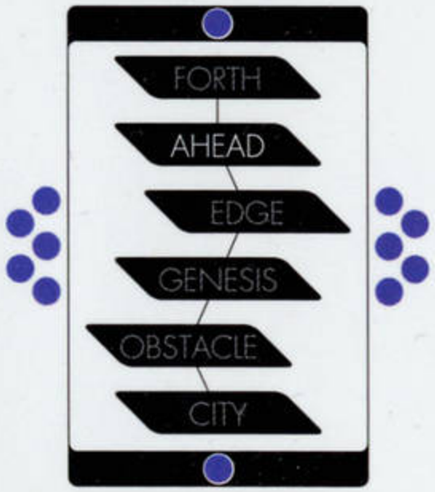
ISBN4-8402-2407-2

C0193 ¥730E

1920193007305

発行◉メディアワークス

定価：本体730円
※消費税が別に加算されます



The 1st.AHEAD

かわかみ　みのる
川上　稔

1975年1月3日生まれ、東京出身。連休中に次々と友人たちが訪れ、つき合うままに菓子を食べ続けた結果、ちと体重上昇。燃費が良すぎるので最近は野菜ジュースでダイエット中。

【電撃文庫作品】

都市シリーズ

パンツァーポリス1935

エアリアルシティ

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AHEADシリーズ

終わりのクロニクル①〈上〉

終わりのクロニクル①〈下〉

イラスト：さとやす（TENKY）

山形生まれの栃木育ち。「最近はフリーマケットで里親待ちの子猫がいて、無茶苦茶誘惑されました」……誘惑に勝ったかどうかがえらく謎ですが。

カバー／旭印刷

The Ending Chronicle

Act.01

CHARACTER

02

Name: Brunhild·Schild
Class: Next Term Art Club Head
Faith: Long-Lived Girl

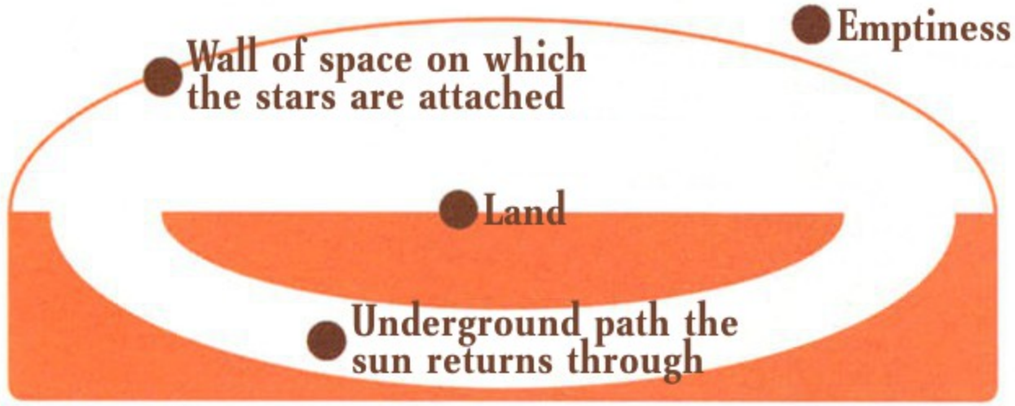
04

Its capital city was the royal city of Wotan.
It was a fortress city ruled by a king with a few
villages located nearby. The king and all the people could
naturally communicate their thoughts using spirits as an intermediary.
The space available to them was small, but because the different races
could communicate, the world was able to control nature and to regulate
how many children they had. During the Concept War, the king fortified 1st-Gear's
defenses and tried to withstand until the time of destruction. However...?

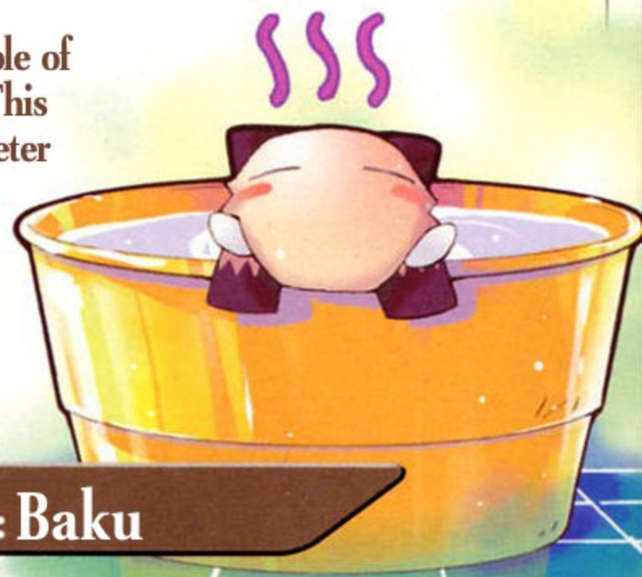
Name: Shinjou·Setsu

• About 1st-Gear •

1st-Gear was a world where writing holds power.
It began when written structures similar to genes started to move,
gained an "expressive form" through repeated mutations and
evolutions, and settled into their final forms. Thus, everything in
this world held its attributes within itself in the form of writing.



The world was formed from a table of land surrounded by a finite sea. This small alternate world had a diameter of only approximately one hundred kilometers. The sky was surrounded by a dome of outer space and only the sun and stars floated there. When the sun set, it would circle around below the land to return to its original location.



Name: Baku

DARK HALL OF FAME

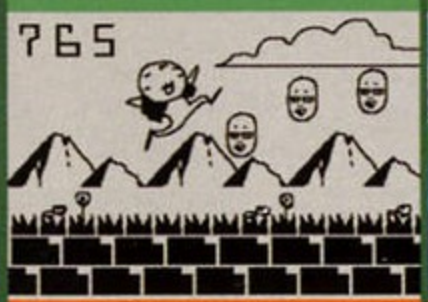
RECOMMENDED

RANDOM REVIEWS OF NEW RELEASES: 2 GAMES IN 30 MINUTES CHALLENGE

REVIEWS FROM A TRIO

RETRO BOMBER 108 STARS

19 POINTS



GAME LAD MONOCHROME ONLY

A retro game developed by UCAT's electronics development group. Please enjoy how terrible the art is. Just do your best and try to get all 108!

It feels like everything has gone back to the Showa era. I wonder how everyone is getting along. This reminds me of when I got into a fistfight with my grandfather because he erased my high score. He knocked my back tooth loose. I will give you some free points for the trauma.

Oh, now this one's good. It's simple and the designs are cute. Now this is what a modern game should be like. ...Eh? What? This isn't modern? Games are on CDs now? C'mon, quit lying. CDs play music.

Really, why did you bring this kind of job to me? I mean, well... Ahh! I died again! Man, this is addictive... Wait, I totally dodged that!! No, don't worry. I'll give it back later. Ah, I died!

MIYOKO'S UMBRELLA

4 POINTS

PC 18+

Adult game developed by UCAT's electronics development group. The protagonist who picks up Miyoko's umbrella boldly goes nuts until he becomes Alexander the Great.

A completely natural visual novel. If you cannot identify with the characters, it is all over for the game. If you will let me give a critical opinion, I do not see why anyone would pay so much money to see something anyone can do once they are adults.

Um, well, I keep pressing the button, but the game never starts... Is there something wrong with the one I got? Shouldn't something be falling down or chasing you? Um...I can't score this.

In all seriousness, what kind of thoughts do you want from me when you make me play this? Well... When I give the main character my boyfriend's name, it keeps pissing me off because it looks like he's cheating on me. Is that what you wanted? Oh, it isn't.

EXTREME SAYAMA

Games make me nostalgic for the board games I would play late at night with my grandfather. I remember the life simulation would always be decided by who could sell off the most adopted children. When we had too many children, we could not fit them into the car game pieces. How nostalgic.

GAMER SHINJOU

They made a game café in UCAT recently. You can play games on the tables. It's 100 yen a play. The game where you shoot invaders is a lot of fun. Eh? It's the 21st century? Arcades? What are those?

PISTON KAZAMI

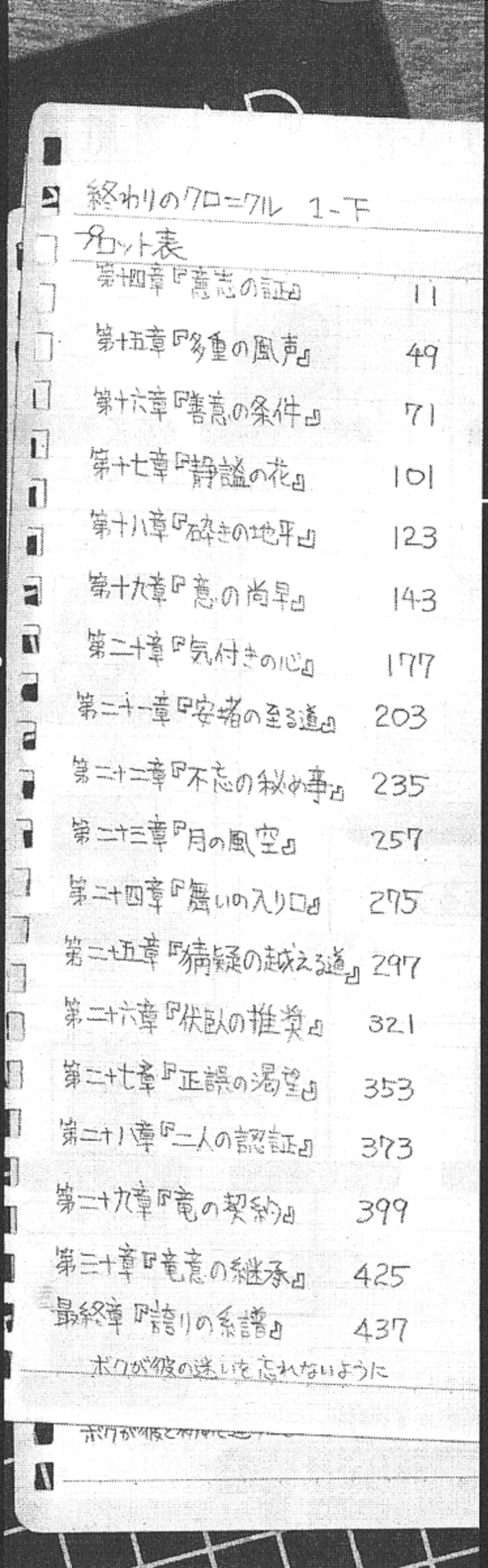
Games, huh? I'm not really into that kind of thing. And...listen. I'm not mad, so just answer the question I'm about to ask. Don't worry. Don't cry. I'm not scary. Now, I'll say it with a smile: what do you mean "piston"?

終わりのクロニクル

著●川上 稔　イラスト●さとやす（TENKY）

1
【下】

—Gentlemen.
Let’s look at the end of the first plan.
In order to determine a horizon for yourself.



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イラスト：さとやす（TENKY）
カバーデザイン：渡辺宏一（2725inc）
本文デザイン：TENKY

01

·Current relation chart centered around Sayama·

Former defense division members

Family

? — Protected — ?

Sayama Kaoru
Foster father

Tamiya Family
Substitute home

?
Sayama's parents
Already dead

School

Ooki-sensei
Teacher/Advisor

Siegfried
Librarian

Student Body

Izumo Kaku
President

Kazami Chisato
Treasurer

Sayama Mikoto

Roommates
Interested in
Supervisor
Siblings?

Students

Shinjou Setsu

Brunhild
General Art Club Head

UCAT

Shinjou Sadame

Oshiro Itaru

Father & son

Oshiro Kazuo
Troubled old man

Master & servant

Sf

Chapter 14: Proof of Determination

Chapter 14

“Proof of Determination”

Wondering what you are being shown
Might very well be
The same as wanting to see something

Wondering what you are being shown

Might very well be

The same as wanting to see something

Brunhild began to glide after approximately half an hour of flying at full speed.

She watched the scenery shooting by at high speed. The area down below had been dark for a bit, but it had once more grown bright.

She could see the lights of a city below and a bay gouged out a section to the southwest.

"Kobe, Osaka, and Sakai."

Brunhild muttered the names of the cities visible below and used her right fingertips to lightly tap the blue philosopher's stone used to pilot the broom. As her speed decreased, she checked to make sure a single

vertical stability wing had emerged from the bottom of the broom. Being in the windbreak area she lifted her body up.

Her toes were still on the brush, so her position was similar to being seated seiza-style. The light coming from the brush had returned to being bluish-white, so Brunhild lightly tapped the stone to bring the light outside of the visible spectrum.

"Doing this at low speed has terrible fuel efficiency."

She sighed, wiped frost from the end of her three-cornered hat, and looked back down.

The light below her was dwindling once more. The darkness of a mountainous area was filling the area below.

As she stared down at the earth, she spoke to the cat clinging to the tip of the handle.

"Hey, there's the forest."

She waited for five seconds, but received no response. She tilted her head and looked forward.

The cat was clinging to the broom handle with its entire body. And that was all it was doing.

For some reason, the cat's body was glittering slightly in the moonlight.

"?"

Brunhild looked closer to find the cat's entire body was covered by frost. That frost was reflecting the moonlight.

"How pretty," she muttered just before the cat came loose from the handle.

It lost its balance and fell down. After watching for a moment, Brunhild let out an "ah" and stretched out an arm. She grabbed the cat's tail and pulled it back up.

She held the black cat in front of her face. Its eyes were opened wide and staring straight forward and both ends of its mouth were frozen in place while raised up as far as they would go. Brunhild frowned and shook the cat up and down.

"What are you doing? That's dangerous."

Finally, the cat gave a start.

"Wah!" it shouted and shook its legs. "I-I-I-I'm gonna die! You're killing me!"

"What's the matter? You make this sound so dangerous. Did you have a bad dream again?"

"Y-y-y-y-yes yes yes! I had a dream I was thrown into the air and frozen! …That was a dream, right?"

"Of course it was. But how very odd. You fell asleep with history's most amused expression." Brunhild held the cat in one arm. "Well, even if you had a scary dream, don't worry. I am here."

"Can I really trust you?"

"Did you say something?"

"No, nothing," came the response within her arm.

At that point, the land down below became fully covered in darkness.

Brunhild tilted the broom slightly down and to the right. She turned toward the depths of the mountain.

Slowly but surely, their altitude lowered. But with the dark mountains below and the night sky above, it was hard to tell they were descending. Brunhild checked the nightscape of Osaka behind her to check the horizon.

She descended.

The darkness below gradually gained visual features. The bare mountain surface and shapes of trees grew visible in the moonlight.

"Almost there," she muttered while focusing on the forest floating up in the moonlight.

Brunhild could see a line of rectangular manmade objects. They were buildings.

This line of unlit buildings in the mountain forest created a village.

The black cat held at her chest spoke.

"There's never anyone there. It really is a ghost town."

"…Having ruined areas in your Gear is the height of luxury."

"The people who lived in this village and the people who live in that giant city over there know nothing about the destruction of our Gear. If they knew, they might show some regret."

The abandoned village flowed slowly by below them.

As she watched it, Brunhild said, "But why didn't UCAT tell anyone about the Concept War?"

"They probably wanted to play the role of heroes. They wanted to secretly finish things without bringing confusion to their world… That was the complete opposite of 1st-Gear's king. The king did everything he could to protect 1st-Gear. He deployed the mechanical dragons for defense and split the Concept Core in two."

"And Siegfried took advantage of that. The royal palace was destroyed and the chain of command fell apart. Doctor Regin joined with mechanical dragon Fafnir and tried to protect the half of 1st-Gear's concepts that were held inside, but Siegfried stole the holy sword Gram Doctor Regin had created and…" She took a breath . "If Doctor Regin's Fafnir had been Venerable Hagen's Fafnir Custom, it might have turned out differently."

"How? What's different about the modified version?"

"Oh, wait a second. I can see the headquarters."

Two large buildings were visible a short distance from the abandoned village. It was a school. The two buildings were the school building and a gym. Brunhild descended toward the gym.

"The modified version is a mechanical dragon strengthened for defense. It has two reactors: one for movement and one for its weaponry. The old Fafnir that Venerable Regin joined with had only one reactor, so it had to die when the holy sword Gram was used to destroy the reactor where half of the Concept Core was stored in."

"On the other hand, Venerable Hagen's Fafnir Custom is…?"

"It has the remaining half of the Concept Core sealed in the weaponry reactor. That power is the grudge of 1st-Gear itself. Even if it is lost, either the remaining movement reactor will be used to crush the enemy or it will be annihilated."

Brunhild felt the cat tremble.

"Are you afraid? Do not worry. Venerable Hagen will not be defeated."

"Um, no. That isn't it. Being cooled down like this makes me need to use the bathroo-…Wait, stop hanging me down like this! Ahh, wetting myself is so humiliating! "

Kazami and Izumo were performing treasury work in the Kinugasa Library at night.

"This may be spring break, but we've been doing a lot of work since taking over from last term. …Oh, Kaku. You don't have to be so focused on pasting those receipts that you end up looking like a robot. You actually have a serious look in your eyes."

"Oh, how should I put it? I've gotten hooked on the smell of glue. …I guess you could say it's a habit?"

Kazami ignored him. She diligently divided the account book in her hands between debit and credit.

But she suddenly looked up. Izumo noticed from where he sat next to her.

"What is it? Is something odd about-… gah!! Y-you idiot! I didn't even say anything yet!"

Kazami ignored Izumo's protests and pulled back the hand she had sent to the left in a slap. Siegfried looked over from the counter, but she waved back to say it was nothing. She then stood up.

"…A sound? How odd," she muttered before walking over to the western edge of the Kinugasa Library.

A supply room was located there. She passed through the narrow entrance into a small space where piles of books and large rolled up maps were kept.

"What is it?" called Siegfried across the four classrooms' length distance between the counter and the supply room. Kazami turned back and looked across the entire length of the Kinugasa Library. She spoke loud enough to reach from the entrance of the supply room.

"Have you heard a bird chirping for a while now?"

"The wall over there must resonate because you can hear noises from the upper floors. The art room on the third floor and the music room on the second floor come in separately."

"But why a bird? Am I hearing it wrong?"

Just as she asked, Kazami looked up in realization. She had heard it once more.

"Hm. I believe Brunhild Schild, the head of the art club , is raising one. She is the only one using the art room during spring break."

"You know a lot about this," commented Izumo.

Siegfried nodded once and replied, "She seems to dislike me."

He spoke so naturally that Kazami could not think of anything to say in response.

She walked back toward the table. As Izumo listened to her footsteps, he asked a question to smooth things over.

"Come to think of it." He chose his words cautiously. " How powerful is 1st-Gear really? The remaining remnant is the City faction, right? How much power do they have ?"

He turned his question toward Siegfried.

The man looked over from behind the counter.

"We had a conflict today, remember?"

"Yeah. How powerful are they compared to that?"

"Today's battle was mere child's play. 1st-Gear's true power is not magic created from words. It is pure violence supported by words."

Brunhild descended toward a schoolyard that had puddles remaining.

Dry leaves were scattered across the schoolyard and neither the school building nor the gym had any glass left.

It was an abandoned school.

Brunhild lowered in front of the gym while spreading wind around her. At five meters from the ground, she began the landing preparations.

In her right hand, she held a blue stone and the broom handle. She slowly loosened the grip of her right hand while moving the brush portion down. She gradually stood the broom up vertically.

Once the wind blowing from the brush swept across the ground directly below, the black cat jumped down as if peeling itself from the handle. Next, Brunhild placed her feet on the ground and completely stopped the broom's output.

She let out a breath.

She removed the blue stone wrapped around the broom with a chain, tapped the handle, and muttered, " Excellent work."

Afterwards, they both stretched their stiff bodies at about the same moment.

"Ahh… Standing on the ground is definitely best."

"I just heard the most selfish comment in the world…"

"I'm in a good mood, so I will ignore that," said Brunhild with a smile before walking toward the gym.

The door to the gym was tilted out of place. The inside could be glimpsed through it. The floor had rotted, the boarding had been torn up, and large holes existed here and there. Of the basketball goals prepared for the two courts, one was hanging down at an angle and two had fallen to the floor.

Brunhild walked inside this abandoned gym through the main entrance.

Once she did, faint light gathered around the blue stone at the center of the pendant around her neck.

She heard a voice. This was the Concept Text created from the Concept Core within the mechanical dragon. It supported the worldview of 1st-Gear.

—Words have the ability to provide power.

At the same moment, the words carved into the pendant were given light.

The cat at her feet was also surrounded by blue light for an instant.

And then the world changed.

When Brunhild looked forward once more, she saw a fortress.

The floor and stage within the gym had been removed and replaced with a wooden-floored hangar. Several shelves were lined up and filled with combat brooms, rifles, spears, and other weapons. The shelves also contained organized arrangements of backpacks and other equipment for heading out.

The center of the hangar contained a large wooden lift leading underground. Next to it was a single hole containing a slope leading underground as well.

Brunhild walked toward the downward slope and greeted the giant soldiers patrolling around the hangar.

“I have not been by in a while, but are things okay here? You haven’t been found, have you?”

"Everything is fine," replied an old giant as he gave a light wave and turned around.

Brunhild waved back and continued toward the slope. A glance at the lift next to the slope showed that the surface had the word for steel carved into its surface.

However, that word had large scratches running through it.

Giant claws had left those scratches. Brunhild looked down at the black cat.

"Venerable Hagen loves the moonlight, so he comes out whenever he can," she said with a sigh.

She then continued down the slope while looking at those scratches.

The inside of the slope was lit by the word for light written on the ceiling. The word for nonslip covered the floor, so she had no problem keeping her footing.

She reached a landing partway and continued down.

The slope came to an end at the door that had originally been used as the school building's main

entrance. The large door had a large piece of glass inside and “sturdy” was written on the surface. This prevented the inside from being seen despite the glass being transparent.

Brunhild pushed on the door.

A large space had been created underground. The area was fifty meters square and it was shielded by square lumber and wooden flooring. The ceiling which emitted pale crimson light was seven or eight meters high. The bulkhead door in the center of the ceiling was opened to raise the lift on the floor.

Currently, a number of figures were gathered in front of the lift platform.

It was a gathering of people and other beings.

The figures were split down the middle with approximately fifty on either side. A few were standing, a few were facing each other, and they were exchanging words. The words held enough force to call them shouts.

The left side contained mostly youths with excellent physiques while the right contained mostly older people with slender bodies.

The voices reverberating through the underground area reached Brunhild as mere noise.

The black cat at her feet asked, “The representatives of the radicals and the conservatives are at it again.”

“How depressing. If I worked here, I would probably be shouting over there with you at my side.”

“I’m just a cat you took in after leaving here. If you were here, I would not be with you.”

“I suppose so,” said Brunhild as she glanced to the side of the entrance.

A shelf was located there with a few personal brooms on it. Brunhild frowned as she looked at the brooms lined up there.

“Kids these days forget all about tradition and go straight for the strange nose art. And what is this six-tone horn?”

"Our broom has a floral pattern cover, you know?"

"Don't call it a cover. It's a vector nozzle."

Brunhild then placed her broom next to the others.

Behind her, an especially loud voice came from the gathered people. The black cat turned its ear toward the voice.

"That's Fafner."

"He certainly has energy. He was about to die when he arrived here after leaving the peaceful faction, though."

"Well, the concept environment of Low-Gear is not suited for his race at all."

"What a pain," said Brunhild as she turned around.

A strange figure could be seen on the left side of the gathering. That figure was almost two meters tall and was covered in a black shell. He had a sharply angled face, three horns, and long blond hair. Instead of clothes put on over the head like Brunhild's, he wore an open-backed jacket and shirt that were affixed to the shoulders. The reason for this was…

"The wings on his back are raised… Is he trying to intimidate them?"

The silhouettes that looked like arms covered in a shell were two wings. They were both black and stretched toward the ceiling in a V-shape.

As Brunhild watched on, Fafner glanced across his opponents and shouted.

"What is it that we need!?"

Fafner spread his shell-covered arms as he spoke. He swung his long lower arms.

"What we need is to take back the world of 1st-Gear that we lost! We must take back Gram from UCAT and make the Concept Core ours. By releasing it and having it oppose the negative concepts of Low-Gear, we can turn this world into 1st-Gear!"

In response, a single youth stood up on the opposite side. He swung up a hand.

"No! What we need are rights here in Low-Gear. After retrieving Gram from UCAT, we must use it to merge with the peaceful faction! Afterwards, we can manage the release of 1st-Gear's concepts and use that to our advantage in negotiations!" The youth continued. " Fafner, we have not gathered here to fight. Our ultimate objective is the acquisition of Gram and a social position more than equal to Low-Gear's. We do not wish for anything more than that, and even if we must fight to gain that, we do not wish to head down that path before it is necessary. Your ideas are nothing more than a reverse invasion!"

As the youth's words reverberated throughout the underground space, the figures sitting next to him all nodded slightly.

As Fafner watched those many movements of agreement, he tilted his head in confusion.

"A reverse invasion? No. Call it recovering lost territory. The land protected by our ancestors was destroyed. Isn't it only natural to fight for land to take in its place?"

"Low-Gear will never allow that! If they allowed us to recover our lost territory, they would be forced to accept the identical demands of the other Gears. Do you really think Low-Gear will allow that to happen?"

"That's why we fight. Do you really not get it?" asked Fafner.

He lightly bent both arms as if scooping up those seated next to him and clenched the large fingers at the end of those arms.

The crimson light pouring down from the ceiling cast the motions of his fingers on the floor in the form of shadows.

"Listen. Low-Gear is acting as if the Concept War never happened. They have sealed off all information on it and any actions taken in retribution or attempts to release the information are suppressed by UCAT, the militaries of various countries, or those countries' governments. …Let me ask you one question: where exactly are we in this Gear?" He pointed toward his feet. "We are currently in the shadows of this Gear. It was the

same in the UCAT reservation. We are shoved into small pieces of land. The sky is closed in low over our heads and we cannot interact with the outside world."

"Is that not why we are attempting to win this battle and gain the right to freedom in this Gear?"

"…Freedom? If this world is not filled with the same concepts as 1st-Gear, I and some of the other races cannot even breathe properly. Our cardiopulmonary abilities are not supported by this Gear's concepts. When you speak of freedom, are you including true freedom for all of us?"

"Well…"

"You don't understand. Your race is similar to the humans here in Low-Gear. Your body can function under the concepts of this Gear and you can mix into their society. As long as you are able to touch water for half the day. …Tree spirit, you can never understand our pain . Or the pain of always fighting on the front lines."

Fafner ignored how his opponent clenched his back teeth.

He instead looked over at the entrance to the large hall . A figure was circling around them, heading further in.

It was a girl in black clothing followed by a black cat. Fafner called out to her.

"Are you heading further in? Lord Hagen is asleep."

"I am sure your voice woke him up."

"Hah! I hope it did! Anyway, how are things going on your end, Nein?"

The name he gave caused the girl to stop.

This was no natural action. She stopped as if stabbing her foot into the ground.

Fafner folded his arms when he heard that footstep ring out. The girl glanced over at him.

"…Only Venerable Hagen may call me by that name. Are you attempting to infringe on his authority?"

"My apologies, Brunhild. I thought you were fighting to regain that name you lost," said Fafner with a hint of amusement in his voice. "Weren't you supposed to monitor Siegfried and assassinate him if you had an opening? It has been three years of nothing but periodic

reports. I sincerely hope you are not simply talking your way out of this. After all, when you were young, you and Siegfried-…"

Fafner stopped speaking because of a loud shout from the ground at the girl's feet.

"Stop!"

The shout had come from the black cat following her. It brought its claws out on the floor and rose up offensively.

"We are doing our job, Fafner! And what about this discussion of yours today? You are having a meeting concerning the Royal Palace faction's battle we saw, aren't you? All you do is discuss things! We are actually working!" The cat then smiled slightly while still in its offensive pose. "If you want to cheer her on, how about doing so in a more straightforward fashion?"

"Lately, cheering people on is making me depressed. I apologize for being so roundabout," replied Fafner while still smiling. He then turned toward the girl. "Get going, long-lived girl. I need to speak with him afterwards, too."

He then faced forward once more.

He looked across his opponents' faces one by one.

"Do you get it now? Not everyone here can live under this Gear's concepts like you can. Gaining our freedom and turning this world into 1st-Gear are one and the same." Fafner clapped his hands together. "Unless we transform this Gear into 1st-Gear, we cannot exist here! We may be able to gain certain rights without doing that, but are those true rights at all!? What meaning is there in being treated favorably if you are stuck in some cramped space?"

The youth opposite him clenched his back teeth.

Just as he began to back down, someone supported him from behind. It was the old man sitting next to him.

The gray-haired man placed a hand on the youth's shoulder and had him sit down. The old man then faced Fafner.

And he asked, "Fafner, that was an excellent speech. But you are forgetting one thing."

"And what is that?"

The old man pointed toward Fafner and nodded.

"You were not yet born when 1st-Gear was destroyed. It was not your world that was destroyed. It was our world. You-…"

"But I am a half-dragon of 1st-Gear," cut in Fafner before the old man could finish. "Listen. I believe that I am of 1st-Gear. And that is where it all begins." Fafner sank down slightly so as to stare the old man in the eye. " I know nothing. I do not know my countless ancestors. I do not know the kingdom or its king. I do not know that limited land. I do not know a moonless night. I do not know a sky in which I can fly. I do not know the day of destruction on which we lost. And I do not know what it is I should protect. And that is why I do not know what pride is!" He took a breath. "But you elders know. You know what pride is. That is why you can rely on your pride when forced into these cramped areas. But we have nothing. And yet we are still of 1st-Gear. We wish to be. …Then what are we to do? How are we supposed to gain that pride!?"

The old man frowned as Fafner watched him, but he fell silent.

Viewing that silence as a type of response, Fafner rose up once more.

He let his voice resound throughout the entire area instead of just those gathered in the center.

“What I want is proof that 1st-Gear is still with us! If you have a method that does not require turning this world into 1st-Gear, then let me hear it!”

A single voice rang out within the Kinugasa Library. It was Siegfried’s voice.

“1st-Gear had trouble heading into other Gears. The differences between its own races are so great that many of them cannot live while not under the concepts of 1st-Gear.”

He stood next to the table with a cup in hand while Kazami looked up at him from her seat.

“How did they survive in 1st-Gear?”

“With the power of writing. No in depth investigation has been done, but it is thought their genetic arrays also

carry the function of writing. The same goes for their world. The air and sky contained spirits that carried out the meaning of the writing."

"So the concepts and the residents fit each other perfectly," said Izumo from next to Kazami. "Those who had grown fond of that Gear would have a difficult time of going to other Gears."

"Yes. 1st-Gear was never a powerful Gear. But they strengthened their races and repeatedly fought the other Gears until they finally succeeded in constructing the mechanical dragons that were the masters of land battles. At the very end of their research, they constructed two Fafnirs as their flag-dragons. But the 1st-Gear mechanical dragons had a certain defect."

"A defect?"

"When the pilot joined with them, they produced a powerful rejection reaction that would kill most of the pilots. And even if the pilot survived that, they could never again return to their original form. They would be a mechanical dragon for the rest of their lives."

"And one of those survivors still exists, right? A major one called Fafnir Custom."

"Yes. Of the two Fafnirs, I killed the one being serviced within the royal palace. However, the one being modified in the weapons laboratory escaped the destruction of 1st-Gear."

"Why would they create those? The representatives of 1st-Gear must have really loved war."

Siegfried shook his head.

"They hated war. 1st-Gear's king lost his queen in the Concept War. That was why he created the mechanical dragons for defense. He did not want anyone to enter 1st-Gear until the time of destruction. He also split the extracted Concept Core in two, used the concepts that controlled the construction of the world to seal the world , and settled into a defensive role."

"Isn't that…the same as abandoning the Concept War? "

"Yes, it is. And that is why…"

Siegfried suddenly trailed off. He brought his cup to his mouth and said something else.

"Depending on Sayama's actions, you will likely learn the rest before long."

A large bulkhead existed at the back of the large hall underneath the 1st-Gear base.

Brunhild walked toward the side entrance next to that bulkhead.

She could hear Fafner's voice behind her, but it disappeared once the door closed behind her.

In exchange, the area grew dark. The black cat at her feet dissolved into the darkness.

"It is cold in here," she said with a nod before looking up.

The ceiling was high and a single light existed in the middle. That crimson light was coming from a small hanging bell with the word for "torch" engraved into it.

As her eyes adjusted to that light, Brunhild looked down.

She was in a large hall just like the one next to it.

"But this is not public space. It is a private room…"

As she lowered her gaze, a giant mountain-like silhouette existed before Brunhild's eyes.

But this was no mountain. It was a collection of structures with several surfaces and it all formed seven mountains colored white. The head, the body, the four limbs, and the tail made seven.

A steel dragon lay before her.

This mechanical dragon was over thirty meters long and was currently lying down. Its basic coloration was white and dark green, but the moving parts were covered in black. And most of the weaponry had been removed.

Each of the hard points had black dummy weapons attached. Other than the heat sinks that looked like folded up wings and the standard blades on the back and four limbs, no offensive ability could be seen on the surface. Most of its standard weaponry was kept inside,

but all of the closable slits on the armor plates were covered in the yellow labels meaning maintenance was complete.

"…"

As Brunhild silently watched the dragon, a voice suddenly called out to her from above.

"What is it, Brunhild?"

She looked up in surprise and found a figure on the dragon's back.

It was a tall old man. He had long, wavy gray hair and a beard to match. He was of course wearing a dark green cloak.

He glowed slightly in the dim darkness and he was transparent.

Brunhild bowed as she looked up at him.

"I, Brunhild, have returned, Venerable Hagen. Were you asleep?"

"No, I was awake. …Well done making it back."

The old man's eyes narrowed in a smile and his mouth moved, but the voice came from elsewhere. The voice came from a ventilation opening-like black slit on the dragon's back that lay before her eyes.

When Brunhild moved once more, small noises came from across the mechanical dragon's body. This sound reminiscent of light being slightly reflected came from the auxiliary vision devices covered in a protective material. It was the sound of the dragon's gaze following her.

But Brunhild paid none of that any heed as she looked toward the old man. The old man spoke to her as if he really was nothing but an old man.

"How has it gone?"

"My familiar will provide the details. …What will the Royal Palace faction do?"

"It seems they will surrender three days from now. A messenger told us their actions are over after that final attack."

"I see," said Brunhild with a nod.

The black cat at her feet sighed and said, “So that’s what has Fafner and the others so worked up. Put a stop to it, Venerable Hagen.”

“Hey, what are you saying?”

Brunhild grabbed and strangled the cat while the old man, Hagen, smiled bitterly.

“I cannot do that, my small comrade.”

“Really? Because they’re comrades?”

“No. If I did it, they would die even if I held back. We can’t have that.”

The cat looked up at Brunhild.

“Am I supposed to laugh at that or ignore it?”

“You are supposed to avoid asking that sort of question,” said Hagen with another bitter smile. He then frowned worriedly. “Brunhild, I can get the detailed report form that cat later. Is there any other information you need to give me?”

"Yes. UCAT has sent a special unit for the Leviathan Road into combat while still putting it together. Also, Fasolt who is working with UCAT as part of the peaceful faction will apparently be meeting tomorrow with the person in charge of the Leviathan Road."

"They certainly are rushing this. So Fasolt has completely turned toward Low-Gear's side…"

"I understand why Fafner is feeling so desperate. He is Fasolt's son after all."

"A warrior who calls his father a loser… He is arguing right now, isn't he? How is he? Young?"

"…I would say inexperienced rather than young. He seems to be using childish arguments and claiming they represent justice."

Hagen's bitter smile deepened at Brunhild's words.

"He cannot help but give childish arguments. This is a child attempting to persuade the adults who need a reason for doing anything. But…once adults grow accustomed to acting based on arbitrary reasons, they will finally lose once the children begin seriously

insisting on childish justice. They do not lose to the children's argument, but to something much more dangerous."

"Something…much more dangerous?"

"Yes, something very dangerous. Something we once had, something we will never have again, and something we once used to push aside the adults." He rested his chin on his hand and looked up. "Fasolt's son was given an honest upbringing."

"It seems Fasolt has gone through a lot of hardship in that UCAT reservation."

"Yes," said Hagen while still looking up. "Fasolt has actually done quite well in that UCAT reservation. He has accepted relying on UCAT to control the concepts while seeking for safety in that tiny reservation. Everyone complains that he has done nothing more than that, but the peaceful faction has their lives in UCAT's hands while on that reservation."

"If the concept space is removed, most of them would not last half a month."

"Fasolt and the others there are only able to live the way they are because of the negotiations they carried out using the possessions and knowledge they escaped with …and because of UCAT's kindness, I suppose."

"You must not say that to the others."

Brunhild frowned and looked up at Hagen.

As the old man rested his chin on his hand, a slight smile was visible on his lips. That smile slowly widened.

"I know that. After all, I was the one that led everyone here and used the Concept Core we had to create this concept space. …As a former guide and current protector , I am needed as everyone's leader. As troublesome as that can be." He turned toward Brunhild. "How about we trade? You can take my Fafnir Custom and I can take your Requiem Sense. I would be a lot happier chatting about old times with the residents of the underworld."

"That is impossible. After joining with the mechanical dragon, you cannot separate from it, right? And the concept creating the underworld is too weak here in Low-Gear. Even if you opened it with Sense, the residents could only come out for short periods of time."

"True. …If we could speak with them properly, it might help lessen everyone's enmity."

Hagen raised his head and looked at the bulkhead separating this hall from the next.

"If we had not feared the destruction of the world, we might have been able to save many more."

He lowered his gaze. Small sounds came from across Fafnir as darkening filters were added to the vision devices.

"It is a shame about that bird as well."

"That was his fault. He abandoned it."

"He may have been the one to abandon it, but we were the ones that did not save it."

Hagen opened his eyes as he spoke. And then he suddenly uttered a single name into the darkness.

"Fafner."

The vision devices moved and Hagen's face turned toward the area behind Brunhild.

She turned around and saw a black shelled figure in the darkness. Brunhild and the black cat frantically took a step back and took a defensive stance.

"…How long have you been here!?"

"I only just came in. Don't act so defensive. My element is darkness. I am a darkness-travelling half-dragon. I can move anywhere I wish as long as it is filled with darkness."

Fafner changed from being a presence in the darkness to having an actual physical body.

Without turning toward Brunhild, he bowed toward Hagen.

"What will we do?" he asked.

Hagen sat up and pointed toward the bulkhead with his chin.

"You were holding a discussion on the other side, weren't you?"

"Our view won out, so we concluded by deciding to have you make the decision, Lord Hagen."

"I see you are speaking formally again," muttered Hagen as he scratched his head. "Hmm. How about I make my decision after seeing what Fasolt does tomorrow? Brunhild, you said he is carrying out preliminary negotiations with UCAT tomorrow, didn't you?"

"Yes. This information came from the peaceful faction, so there is no doubt about it."

Brunhild nodded and looked toward Fafner.

Fafner looked at her, let his shoulders droop, and sighed.

"Um, Lord Hagen, this may not be my place to speak, but…"

"Oh, you're back to your normal self. Speak freely."

Fafner skillfully crossed his long lower arms and rested his chin on his hand.

"Why do you put off making decisions? We gathered around you and were led this far by you."

"I would prefer if you did not speak as if I have no independence."

"This is your duty as the one in charge."

"I suppose you are right… Sorry."

When the black cat heard that, it tapped at Brunhild's leg.

"…Which of these two holds the higher position?"

"I do," replied Brunhild and both Fafner and Hagen turned toward her. She nodded and said, "Please continue with your constructive discussion."

Fafner sighed, lowered his chin from his hand and brought that hand to his head.

He tapped at the shell of his head with a claw before speaking once more.

"Lord Hagen, your younger brother, Venerable Regin, and your niece, Lady Gutrune, were killed by Siegfried

and you were unable to protect the king. Where is your grudge over that?"

"That is actually a very good question. I know it is inside me somewhere, but I have lost track of where exactly it is. Fafner, I am sure you hope that it is within my weaponry reactor. And…" Hagen gave a small nod. " It was not only my family that was lost. I have decided not to act based on personal feelings. I will act when everyone agrees or when the perfect opportunity arrives. Currently, that opportunity has not come. Do not rush this, Fafner. Rushing this will lead to losing something."

Hagen did not stop speaking there. He continued with a question.

"And what is it you are fighting for, Fafner?"

Fafner raised his head. He met Hagen's gaze and slowly began speaking.

"To regain…that which we once had."

"I see," replied Hagen. He did not look away from Fafner's gaze as he continued. "Then make sure you remember those words. …Never forget them."

Sayama and Shinjou walked through the school grounds at night.

Both the front and back doors to the second year general school building had been locked, so they could not enter.

With Baku on his shoulder, Sayama tried to turn the knob several times.

“No good… If only I had the same skills as Kouji.”

“Is Kouji the person who picked you up yesterday?”

Sayama began to nod in response, but he stopped. He looked to the person standing next to him.

“I only mentioned him offhand just now…but why do you know about Kouji, Shinjou-kun?”

After a moment, Shinjou began shaking his hands back and forth.

“Oh, um, my sister told me someone amazing came to pick you up.” Shinjou stopped moving his hands and

stared at Sayama's face. "What's that look for? Don't tell me you suspect I'm my sister."

"No. I settled those suspicions when I checked over your body earlier. You may look oddly like her, but you are male."

"Would you have preferred if it was my sister who had come?"

"She did not, so there is no point in discussing it. …At any rate, there is no point in being here if I cannot show you around the inside. I heard an odd noise on the roof earlier, so I thought someone might be inside. We can return to the dorm for tonight."

Shinjou's shoulders drooped when he heard that last sentence.

"I wanted to walk around some more."

"But you have not opened even five of your boxes."

Shinjou groaned and folded his arms at that.

Sayama then said, "I will be leaving tomorrow for some business I need to take care of, but we can go buy

some daily items for you once I return. I can show you some nearby stores…but if you wait until tomorrow to deal with your luggage, you will not know what you need, will you?"

"I suppose not. But I'm surprised, Sayama-kun. You can actually make proper arguments."

"…I get the feeling I need to sit down and straighten you out about a few things."

"Heh heh. Anyway, I am not used to this area, so you have a lot to teach me: the roads, the stores, and the people. I heard the bath here can't be used during spring break."

"Yes. Only the dorm showers are usable at this time. If you are not in a hurry, there is a 24-hour public bath just outside the school's main gate."

"Okay," nodded Shinjou.

He then cast his gaze down, smiled slightly, and walked alongside Sayama.

The two walked side by side.

The moonlight cast their shadows on the ground. Suddenly, Shinjou pointed toward the schoolyard next to the school building.

"Sayama-kun. What is that tower-like thing on the other side of the schoolyard?"

"Oh, that is the climbing bungee jump the exploration club created for last year's school festival. Several lifelines hang down from above, so you tied them to your feet, scaled the 20 meter wall with your own strength, and then jumped down from above."

"That really is showy…"

"Yes. Unsurprisingly, it had problems with the people dropping from above crashing into the people climbing from below. Ha ha ha."

"That is no laughing matter!"

"Do not worry about it. Humans are surprisingly sturdy."

"Really?" sighed Shinjou. He then pointed toward a wall-like piece of art next to the cafeteria building. "What 's that?"

"Oh, that was created to commemorate a graduating class a long time ago. They made clay versions of their handprints and baked them into a board. It is one of the famous locations in the school."

"Oh? So it's a famous location."

"Yes. It was meant as a commemorative decoration, but it turned into some kind of horrifying piece of art because there were a thousand students involved. They tried to remove it, but the digger was knocked over and ended up with handprints all over it. Ha ha ha."

"Stop explaining this kind of thing so happily."

"There is more. The giant hand visible on the other side is-…Ah, wait. Stop pulling on me."

Shinjou grabbed Sayama's sleeve and pulled him toward the dorm.

For an instant, Sayama glanced back toward the second year general school building.

He saw the landing of the emergency staircase on the side of the building. He had seen it that morning as well.

For some reason, he had the feeling his situation changed every time he looked at it. He grinned bitterly.

Shinjou must have noticed where he was looking because he spoke up.

"What is it?"

"With your arrival and plenty of other things, I was thinking that my daily life keeps changing."

Just how much will it change? Sayama asked himself.

And then a dark feeling resembling unease arrived.

…Am I even able to change?

Just as he muttered that thought in his heart, Shinjou tilted his head, looked up at him, and spoke.

"Were you wondering how much it will change?"

Sayama turned back toward Shinjou upon hearing that question.

"…"

Under the moonlight, Shinjou's face was close enough that Sayama could have reached out and touched it.

Shinjou's black hair swayed in the bluish-white moonlight. His black eyes looked straight up at Sayama.

Sayama recognized the movement of that swaying hair and the color of those eyes.

That is Shinjou Sadame's hair and eyes, thought Sayama. *But that is an illusion.*

He felt it was rude to Setsu, but his heart was wrapped in other feelings. He felt it weighed that much on his mind because he had accepted her.

…She is the opposite of me.

He and Shinjou. Ordinary and extraordinary. Normally conflicting ideas were overlapping.

When those thoughts came to mind, his mouth moved involuntarily and he spoke quietly.

He first gave an answer to Shinjou's question.

"I was…wondering."

Shinjou's eyes narrowed slightly. Sayama was unsure if it was due to a smile or not.

But Sayama nodded toward Shinjou and a slight smile appeared on his lips.

"But…I was not wondering how much it will change. I was wondering if I would be able to choose change myself."

"You are a very serious person, Sayama-kun."

"No, I am not."

As soon as he said that about himself, his smile became one of self-derision. And…

A single motion seemed to arrive in response to Sayama's words.

It was the wind.

It came from the west but not as a noise or a sound. It suddenly came as an overpowering pressure.

"…!"

This tremendous wind seemed to slam into them.

It was powerful enough to strip away all other sound.

As it washed over Shinjou, he held his hair down and ducked down. And as soon as Sayama saw that…

He took action. As Shinjou grimaced at the wind, Sayama pulled Shinjou in and held him in his arms.

"Ah," was all Shinjou could say as his slender shoulders were contained within Sayama's arms.

At the same moment, the wind struck Sayama's shoulders like a physical mass.

Baku was almost shaken off, but he frantically clung to Sayama's shoulder.

Amid this tremendous wind, Sayama saw a collection of smoke fly up from the second year general school building's rooftop.

"!?"

He narrowed his eyes and looked up through the wind . The white smoke spread out like fog and quickly disappeared into the sky.

…What was that?

Sayama's suspicion was deepened by a further question from Shinjou.

"…Sand? No, it can't be. There wouldn't be sand on the rooftop."

But Sayama could see nothing else that smoke could be.

The wind lessened and ultimately disappeared.

As if in response to acclimating to the wind, Shinjou's body stiffened slightly in his arms.

His slender finger poked at Sayama's chest and his black eyes looked up at Sayama.

"U-um, I'm fine now, so…"

Shinjou's voice sounded slightly flustered and he began struggling a bit in Sayama's arms. When Sayama

loosened his grip, Shinjou removed himself from those bonds and took a step away.

Sayama heard the sound of Shinjou stepping on the gravel as the remnants of that west wind cut between the two of them.

The sensation of those slender shoulders remained in Sayama's arms as Shinjou spoke.

"That surprised me. I never expected you to suddenly embrace me."

"It looked like the wind was hurting you."

"B-but…I'm a boy."

Sayama tilted his head at that. He was confused why he would bring that up.

"What connection is there between you being a boy and that you were feeling pain?"

"N-none I suppose…"

"We are roommates. There is nothing wrong with doing this much. If you wish for it and I wish for it, then

I will grant that wish of yours. That is all there is to it. That is the etiquette of the Sayama family that I believe in .”

He swung his right hand to stretch out his shirt sleeve and held his right hand out toward Shinjou.

“If you are feeling pain and I wish to protect you, I will protect you. If you do not wish to be alone and I wish to speak with you, I will speak with you. If you have decided you wish to carry your worries alone and I care for you, I will leave you to be on your own. If you do not wish to be here and I wish to do what is best for you, I will hate you.”

And…

“If you wish to grow closer to someone and I see you, I will stand by your side. How does that sound?” asked Sayama. “I will demand nothing of you. I will demand everything of myself. To lay this etiquette at the foundation, I must spread trust. The surname Sayama indicates a villain. Therefore, if you do not oppose me, I will simply grant you this. …And if you do, I will not take it back.”

Shinjou looked down toward Sayama's outstretched hand. Shinjou lightly raised his right hand to take Sayama's hand.

"…"

But he stopped.

Sayama looked up and saw a face with drooping eyebrows beyond Shinjou's stopped hand.

With that uneasy-looking expression, Shinjou tilted his head and asked a question.

"Aren't you being a bit formal, Sayama-kun?"

"I am giving you my etiquette and trust. Do you think I am someone who could do this without really meaning it?"

Shinjou stared at him for a few seconds.

Shinjou opened his mouth as if about to say something , but stopped. And then…

"No."

He shook his head and his shoulders relaxed. With the ends of his eyebrows still lowered, he smiled a bitter smile.

Shinjou then reached out his right hand and took Sayama's hand.

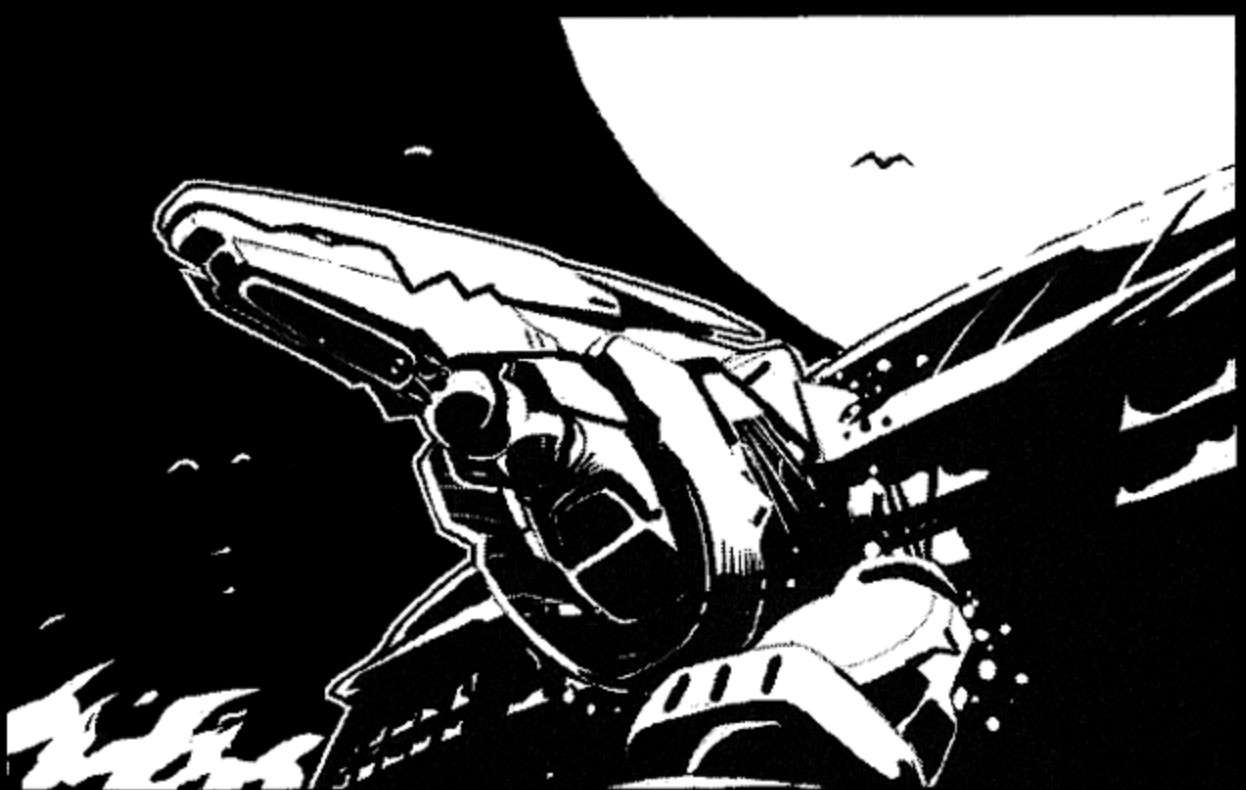
Shinjou's hand was soft. Sayama held those fingers with care, nodded, and breathed a sigh of relief before speaking.

"Then let me say it formally: It is nice to meet you, Shinjou-kun."

Chapter 15: Multiple Sounds of Wind

Chapter 15

“Multiple Sounds of Wind”



Faster than the blowing wind
One’s will rushes through and the truth passes by
The most definite things might be the passing voices

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Brunhild held her broom in both hands as she stood in the schoolyard of an abandoned school surrounded by forest.

She stood on a shadow created from the moonlight as she faced the gym. The cat was not at her feet.

"Is he doing a decent job of telling Venerable Hagen and Fafner what happened today?" she muttered.

The only response came from the blowing wind.

The wind blew in from the east. This movement in the air was gentle yet a certain grandness could be felt in it.

Brunhild held down her hair as she withstood the thick easterly wind.

"The wind is not too-…"

Her voice trailed off before she could say "bad". The forest around her had begun rustling.

This rustling did not come from the leaves brushing together. As the wind gently pushed against the trees, they bent and the forest itself shook. This wind had a different sort of weight than a quick gust of wind.

Brunhild heard the high-pitched cries of birds within the forest.

As she looked around, a flock of birds burst from the moonlit forest.

"No wind created by the earth and wind spirits of 1st-Gear would drive out the birds."

With the forest still bent, the pressure of the easterly wind produced a loud noise. It sounded like the crashing of waves. The cries of wakened birds and beasts filled the wind to provide a high-pitched coloration.

It felt as if the entire forest was walking from east to west. As Brunhild stood in that schoolyard surrounded by the forest, she felt as if the entire commotion was circling around her.

However, that commotion did not approach her any further.

The sound slowly settled down like a receding wave. The wind, the creaking of the forest, and the cries of the birds and beasts all slowly disappeared.

"…"

Brunhild sighed after hearing the final chirp of a bird.

She suddenly realized she was tightly gripping the handle of her broom.

Was I afraid? she asked in self-derision.

It was at that time that she sensed movement in the atmosphere behind her.

She turned around, thinking it was the black cat, but something much bigger filled her vision.

A giant white form had grown from the gym. It was Fafnir Custom.

Fafnir Custom had partially left the concept space enveloping the gym. The inside of the concept space could not be seen from outside. That meant Fafnir Custom had to have moved his face slightly out of the gym to access the outside world.

His giant, long, and slender face was already outside.

He must have taken a single step from within the concept space. The area from his face down to the base of his neck and his front right leg seemed to be pushed out. His metal claws were digging into the schoolyard and giving off several metallic noises. Next, his front left leg, his body, his back right leg, his back left leg, and finally his tail followed.

The dragon's movements were heavy and certain. A heavy metallic noise caused the earth to tremble.

As Brunhild watched on, the dragon's entire form appeared below the moonlight.

That great white and green dragon was over thirty meters long and over seven meters tall at the shoulder.

Other than the red light of the primary vision devices on his face, nothing on him seemed to try to assert his own existence to the outside world.

His entire body only glowed palely in the moonlight.

Fafnir Custom turned to face Brunhild.

He had only walked three steps out of the gym and had stopped at precisely three meters away from Brunhild. He gently lowered his body which caused wind to wash over the schoolyard.

As she watched that wind rip dried leaves from the ground and toss them into the air, Brunhild asked the dragon a question.

"Has it been a while since you came outside, Venerable Hagen?"

Fafnir Custom answered the question in Hagen's voice and tone.

"We have had a lot of meetings lately… And as the concept space will disappear after a few hours if I am gone, it has been harder and harder to find the time. I only came out now to see you off."

Brunhild was relieved to hear a smile in his voice when he spoke that final comment.

A voice then spoke from above Fafnir Custom's head.

"Brunhild," said the black cat.

She looked up to see the black shadow had already climbed down to Fafnir Custom's nose. The black cat tried to stop there, but…

"Ah…no…wah!"

The cat's feet slipped and it slid right off the dragon's head. As the cat shot diagonally toward the ground, Brunhild took a step forward to catch it.

"Watch out," she cried.

The cat performed a counter on the knee she had moved forward.

The impact caused an unassuming noise. In response, the cat let out a controlled breath rather than a scream.

"N-nice effort," it said before sliding down Brunhild's shin.

Brunhild picked the cat's small body up in her left arm and looked back toward Fafnir Custom with the broom still in her right hand. As a weapon, Fafnir Custom could not produce facial expressions. However, Brunhild sighed.

"I know this looks odd, but just know that I do not do this because I want to."

"No, I think it is perfectly fine. I can see much better than I used to and I am glad to see you can remain cheerful."

"I simply do not have much time to be serious. Venerable Hagen, is it tough having to be so serious all the time?"

"Good question…" replied Fafnir Custom with an answer that was neither an affirmation nor a denial. He then lowered his body slightly and asked, "Brunhild, do you see yourself as about to leave or about to return home?"

"Eh…?" Brunhild gasped. "V-Venerable Hagen… Do you think I have forgotten 1st-Gear?"

"No, I do not think that. However, your opinion of the current state of the headquarters does not seem to be a favorable one."

"…I do not like that kind of arguing. I think this might be the nature of the long-lived race."

"Yes. But listen, Brunhild. Even if you are not exactly fond of the others, you must not grow to hate them. Keeping your distance and hating are two different things."

"I-I don't…"

"If only you had someone as long-lived as you who could remain with you always. In your eyes, everyone, myself included, must seem rushed and intent on heading down a selfish path."

The black cat raised its head in her arm. It looked toward Fafnir Custom and spoke.

"You sound like an old man, Venerable Hagen."

"Stop that!" scolded Brunhild.

Fafnir Custom spoke in a smiling voice toward both the scolder and the scolded.

"Ha ha. That is because I am one. My body will not last much longer. I am sure everyone has realized it. And I do not mean my lifespan as a machine. My real lifespan is running out."

"Venerable Hagen…"

Hearing that name, Fafnir Custom turned his primary vision devices accurately toward Brunhild.

"It is because of this body that I was able to last these sixty years. I hear UCAT has means of longevity involving remodeling the human body and using techniques they call magic. I wonder if they will obtain the same loneliness you have…" Fafnir Custom gave a bitter laugh. His body shook slightly. "The reason Fafner and the others are in such a hurry is likely because they are thinking about me. They want to resolve this while I still live."

"Fafner just wants to use you."

"No, he wants me to take action. How nostalgic. Do you remember when Fafner was first brought here?"

"He was raised to be the next leader of the reservation, but he ran off here with one of our guides when he learned of our history. He was inexperienced and arrived half dead after making his way through the thin concepts of Low-Gear. …And now he is the leader of the second generation group." Brunhild nodded at her own words, but then continued. "I do understand why everyone is in such a hurry. UCAT has been very active since the death of Sayama Kaoru, a member of the former National Defense Department along with Siegfried and the others. What could they be doing?"

"They are doing something to prevent this world from falling to the negative concepts. Of course, that is just a front for something else."

"What do they want to do?"

"I do not know. Not even Fasolt and the others working with UCAT know everything. UCAT is hiding something. I can only think they have been doing something in the sixty years since they destroyed our Gear. But as we have left the front lines of the fight to

rebuild ourselves, there is no way we could know what that is."

"Did the late Sayama know about it? Does Siegfried?"

"I would assume so. Also…" Hagen trailed off. When Brunhild tilted her head, Fafnir Custom asked, "Don't you need to get back? When you arrived, you seemed to be in a hurry."

The black cat reacted to those words before Brunhild. It tapped its soft front paw against her chest.

"The bird. Just because you have such a flat chest is no reason to forget about-… Ahh! Being strangled is new!!"

After squeezing the cat's neck, Brunhild bowed toward Fafnir Custom. She then placed the cat on her shoulder.

As she frantically held up her broom, Fafnir Custom spoke up.

"The bird…?"

"Yes. She never learns. She took in a small bird that fell out of its nest."

"Oh, I see. That is good to hear. Brunhild…no, perhaps I should call you Nein."

"I…gave up that name long ago."

"But that is who you are to me. You are the small girl who was taken in by my niece Gutrune and lived in the laboratory of my younger brother Regin. I may have forced a difficult decision on you. For Gutrune and Regin as well, Siegfried was…"

"Please stop. Hearing the names of people we both knew is worse than speaking to myself."

A she spoke, Brunhild tried to give a slight smile.

However, she could not keep the ends of her eyebrows from drooping and the expression held no strength.

She hung her head down and looked at her broom. She wordlessly pulled a blue stone with a chain from her vest pocket and wrapped it around the broom handle. She held the stone and chain in her right hand.

A blue light appeared from the broom's brush and it tried to float up from the ground. Brunhild held it down with both hands.

"It is time we left."

Only then was she finally able to smile.

But it only lasted an instant.

She poured strength into her right hand. As her grip on the stone increased, the pale blue light coming from the brush increased. No one was around to see her here.

"I will be flying up all at once, so please stand back."

"A dragon such as myself will not be damaged by the wind produced by a cute witch."

"No, you would be able to see my underwear."

"My apologies."

Fafnir Custom took a step back and Brunhild gave a bow along with the black cat.

At the same time, she slid her left hand down along the broom handle. She tightly squeezed her right hand while in a pose that made it seem she was playing tug of war against the sky.

The pale blue light coming from the broom's brush rapidly lost its color. In its place, wind began filling the school yard around the broom.

The powerful wind radiated out from the broom as it swept across the school yard.

A high-pitched noise reverberated through the wind. And once that noise reached a certain level…

"I will be going."

With that comment, Brunhild relaxed her entire body save her arms.

It all happened in an instant. She clung to the broom handle as if throwing her body forward. With the resistance holding it in place lessened, the broom shot up into the sky as if it had been forcefully kicked upwards.

It flew in a slight arc up into the sky.

"…!"

Brunhild looked down as the wind pressed down from above.

The shape of the forest was no longer visible and the abandoned school was no larger than a few centimeters across and still growing smaller.

However, a single pale figure was visible in the moonlight covering the clearing of the abandoned school.

"…"

Brunhild cast her eyes down as she continued to cling to the ascending broom handle.

She was headed east. As that direction entered her mind, she muttered in a voice the wind drowned out.

"The direction of the wind that moves the forest…"

Fafnir Custom stared up into the sky in which the moon was visible.

A line of pale clouds could be seen in the sky above as Brunhild flew to the east.

Fafnir Custom continued watching until that line of clouds disappeared in the wind.

"Now then," he muttered before turning to the western edge of the schoolyard.

This was the opposite direction from the gym. A gym storage shed that's roof had rotted away stood next to the school building. The moonlight filled that area with shadows of the night.

Fafnir Custom turned his crimson primary vision devices in that direction.

"I think it is time to speak with you. …You over there. "

As that mechanical voice rang out, three shadows appeared from the darkness filling the western end of the schoolyard.

They belonged to people.

Standing at the front was a tall elderly man wearing a sand-yellow summer coat.

Below a bandanna wrapped like a turban was a deeply tanned face with the Arab features of a hooked nose and sunken eye sockets. However, only the right eye socket had a black eye looking out from it.

Below the coat that was slightly opened by the wind, he wore vest and suit pants. He was walking toward Fafnir Custom with long strides.

Two girls walked behind him to the left and right.

On the right was a tall girl with her black hair bound at the back of her head. Below her black summer coat, she wore the same outfit as the man, but a silk wrapping containing some sort of rod hung to the left of her waist.

On the left was a girl with long hair fluttering in the wind. She wore a black stole over her shoulders, but she wore a white shirt and a black dress below it.

The tall girl on the right was older. She held a sharp look in her eyes and mouth as she glared over at Fafnir Custom. The short girl on the left had the ends of her eyebrows lowered slightly.

Those two contrasting girls flanked the man as the three of them approached. As Fafnir Custom watched that, he suddenly heard a musical tune.

The girl on the left had opened her lips slightly and was singing in the moonlight.

"Silent night, Holy night

All's asleep, one sole light,

Just the faithful and holy pair,

Lovely boy-child with curly hair,

Sleep in heavenly peace

Sleep in heavenly peace."

Fafnir Custom knew that song.

"Brunhild would often sing that after our escape. It is a Low-Gear song. I believe the title is Silent Night."

As the girl cast her eyes down and sang, she suddenly raised her right hand a bit.

When she did, several small shadows descended from the night sky.

They were birds.

These birds whose wings were shaded blue and black by the moonlight were the birds that had been driven

from the forest by the blowing wind. That flock that had lost their spot now gathered on the girl's outstretched arm.

The sound of flapping wings filled the wind of the night.

The birds elicited a smile from the girl's narrowed eyes and faintly raised eyebrows.

"Ha ha," she breathed out. "I have no food for you. So go." The girl pointed toward the forest behind Fafnir Custom. "Go back home."

As soon as the girl spoke, the birds flew up and become silhouettes in the moonlight.

Those black wings created shadows in the dark blue sky. The scattered sound of flapping wings passed by Fafnir Custom in an instant and disappeared into the forest behind him.

Fafnir Custom used all of his auditory devices to listen to the sound of the birds' chirping disappear within the forest.

Finally, it faded away and silence fell.

The man and the two girls had stopped walking. Approximately twenty meters remained between those three and Fafnir Custom.

Even that large mechanical dragon would need to take a few steps to cross that distance.

The three people and Fafnir Custom stared at each other from that distance.

Fafnir Custom made the first move. He spread his four legs and raised his back end.

He was preparing to charge. And in that pose, Fafnir Custom spoke.

"So you have come unannounced once again, information broker. Or should I call you Hajji of the so-called 'Army'."

The man referred to as Hajji smiled at that. His white moustache and his stubble-covered chin bent upwards.

"It has been a dozen or so years now, but that is the first time I have been called that. I am shocked, Hagen."

"You have no right to speak my name… I do not even know what Gear you are from. Even so, you are an information broker who can gather weapons and accurate information. I want to keep any familiarity between us purely professional," said Fafnir Custom. " Also, who are those two insane girls with you?"

Still smiling, Hajji looked at the girls to his left and right. He lightly spread his arms and spoke.

"You could say they are my daughters. The tall one here is Mikoku. The short one is Shino. I thought it was time they learned how to perform this job. Cute, aren't they? Hm?"

As they were introduced, Mikoku nodded and Shino bowed.

Hajji went on to say, "They may not look it, but they are both great warrior djinn. And…"

His smile suddenly disappeared.

But he quickly covered his face with his large right hand. The span of three breaths passed before he lowered his hand once more. Once he did, the smile had returned.

"That does not matter. For tonight, I have some more information for you."

"And are you going to ask once more that I put my forces under your command?"

"I never said anything about putting them under my command. I would never think of such a thing. But we are both trying to stop Low-Gear's Leviathan Road. I believe we want the same thing. Am I wrong? Hm?"

"Sorry, but my answer is the same as before. We will solve our problem in our own way. I have no intention of fighting alongside someone whose identity I do not know."

"If you agree to join us, I will tell you our identity and our objective."

"I might have considered it if that smile were real. … But I said no and I mean no."

When he heard Fafnir Custom's words, Hajji once more covered his mouth with his right hand.

No hint of a smile could be seen in his eyes as a voice leaked through the hand covering his mouth.

"I see…"

And before those two words had faded away, Fafnir Custom fired.

He targeted Mikoku, the girl on the right.

"…!!"

The tall girl was blown backwards as if she had been hit by a car. She floated up higher than her own height and flew several times that distance backwards.

Fafnir Custom had used the right side of his body. A meter long anti-personnel machinegun had been internally installed in that most stable location. It broke through the seal and shot out into the night air. The attack had consumed three pages of the book bullets loaded in it. Three bullets of light with a diameter of two centimeters were fired almost simultaneously.

It had all occurred much too quickly for a human's reaction speed. And all three shots hit.

Mikoku's clothing was torn to pieces both on her chest and on her back where the bullets of light exited.

Many things scattered into the air and her body fell to the ground headfirst.

She struck the ground.

With an unpleasant noise, her neck bent in the correct direction. It bent in the direction it should be bent to ensure there was no saving her.

Her body then rolled two or three times. When she finally came to a stop, her neck must have bent back into place because the air in her lungs passed through her throat and exited her mouth. This created a short coughing sound.

Fafnir Custom used all of his forward-facing vision devices to look at her.

"You taught her well, Hajji. When you lost your smile, she secretly opened that silk wrapping."

He watched her. Even after being blasted away, Mikoku had her right hand next to her left waist. That hand held the grip of something sticking out of that wrapping.

She was not moving. After confirming that, Fafnir Custom fixed his vision devices on Hajji.

Hajji still had his right hand at his mouth, but he finally raised both along with his left.

Fafnir Custom asked, “That girl you called a djinn has fallen. Why did you bring these children with you? And what do you know? We know nothing beyond the destruction of 1st-Gear. But you that call yourselves the Army…” Fafnir Custom looked back and forth between Hajji and the girl on the left. “You are an army made up of a few different Gears, aren’t you? From what I can tell, Hajji, you appear to be from 9th-Gear. And those two girls appear to either be from 2nd-Gear or Low-Gear.”

“You are surprisingly nosy, aren’t you, Hagen?”

“I am saying you possess something that great. You understand, don’t you, Hajji?”

Just as Fafnir Custom ended its preparation for a charge and prepared to take a normal step forward, the vision devices on his right side picked up a single small light.

“!”

Fafnir Custom cast aside the heavy movements from before and leapt to the left. A change came over the joints of his legs. The output bands and wood pipes that provided the legs’ driving force rearranged in an instant to shift from normal mode to short-range movement mode.

He leapt about 10 meters to the left with a cat-like movement.

He leapt such that his face remained pointed toward the light but his back end rotated around.

His back legs landed and dug an arcing curve into the schoolyard.

Fafnir Custom lowered his body with the sound of breaking wood and he saw two changes occur in the spot he had just been standing in.

The first was that a five meter deep sphere of destruction had appeared on the ground there.

The second…

"Why…is the girl I killed there?"

It was Mikoku. While wearing clothes that had been torn to rags, Mikoku stood before the hole of destruction created in the schoolyard. Hanging from her right arm was…

"That is a concept weapon with a philospher's stone inside. Is it a Cowling Sword?"

"Yes. Not many can use them, but we have an excellent instructor in the Army. This girl can travel that far and cause that much destruction in an instant."

Mikoku remained silent. The left hand that did not hold the Cowling Sword held the remains of her torn clothes over her chest.

Fafnir Custom saw her look toward him just once.

Her face held no expression. However, she was not suppressing her emotions like Brunhild.

"She seems to be saying she has no interest in this."

"It is an excellent expression, don't you think? She's guaranteed to be a cool beauty when she grows up, isn't she? Hm?" said Hajji with a smile. "I will provide you with a special service today. I will tell you what we are after before getting to the real topic at hand. How about that?"

"I see," said Fafnir Custom while remaining on guard. "Are you creating an organized rebel army out of the remnants of each Gear in order to stop the Leviathan Road?"

Hajji cast his eyes down and shook his head.

"Too bad. That's not it. What we want," he took a breath, opened his eyes wide, and bowed with a smile on his face, "is the annihilation of each Gear's concepts."

"What…!?"

"I see no need for clarification. I mean exactly what I said, Hagen. We of the Army wish for the disappearance of every concept save the ones that preserve us. That is our goal."

"…Why!? Are you abandoning your own Gears!?"

"We see a reason, meaning, and value in doing so. I assure you we do," said Hajji. The smile vanished from his face as if all enthusiasm was leaving him. "The holy sword Gram stored in UCAT at IAI Headquarters in Shimane will be transported to UCAT in the Tokyo branch office tomorrow night. The airplane should pass right above here."

"Why are you telling us this? We will retrieve the concepts of 1st-Gear, but we do not wish to eliminate them as you do. …We will become your enemy."

"I know that. This is another special service. I am going all out with the special services today." He lowered his gaze with no smile on his face. "Well, for now, we do not mind what you do here. At the very least , we want to avoid having the concepts remain with UCAT. If you do retrieve Gram, we can begin negotiations."

"Negotiations about what?"

"For starters, we will tell you and demand of you the truth without giving any thought to Low-Gear. We must make Low-Gear into what is truly true."

"What is truly true?"

"Yes," said Hajji as he raised his right hand and snapped his fingers.

Mikoku moved back. She took large steps backwards so as to return to her position to the right of Hajji while never taking her eyes off of Fafnir Custom.

At the same time, Hajji and Shino moved back as well. They moved toward the darkness behind them.

"Farewell, Hagen. Our positions will likely have changed by the time we meet again."

"Wait! Answer me, Hajji! What do you mean by what is true!?"

Hajji replied to that reverberating question with a smile.

Mikoku caught up to him and they sank into to darkness behind them.

Just before his sand-yellow summer coat sank into the darkness, Hajji's voice rang out.

"It is a simple matter. In the truest sense of the term, we will pass everything onto the one who will take over after us!"

His answer grew to a shout that contained a hint of a smile.

Fafnir Custom heard that answer.

The three figures had disappeared from his vision.

At some point, an easterly wind had begun to blow around him.

Fafnir Custom quietly muttered to himself in that wind.

"So Gram will be transported tomorrow…"

Chapter 16: The Conditions of Good Will

Chapter 16

“The Conditions of Good Will”

I shall chirp
If I sing well
Will it reach someone?

I shall chirp

If I sing well

Will it reach someone?

After landing on the roof, Brunhild entered the school building with her three-cornered hat and broom in hand. She "unlocked" the rooftop door with her philosopher's stone and quickly made her way to the art room on the third floor. Her footsteps sounded loudly as she made her way down the stairs with the cat.

She unlocked the art room, entered, and found the same dimness as when she had left.

The clock on the wall read 2:00 AM.

A cardboard box sat atop the work desk next to the window whose curtains had been drawn.

The box was in the same place as when she had left. There was no sign of anyone having touched it.

Brunhild breathed a sigh of relief.

She placed her hat and broom on a nearby desk and peered into the box.

The small bird was inside.

However, it was not sleeping in the center. Its small form was collapsed with its head on the edge of the food dish.

It was not moving.

Brunhild's knees gave out and she fell to the floor.

Brunhild suddenly realized she was sitting on the floor .

She could not remember why she had sat down.

And before she could find an answer, she felt a cold sensation on her butt and thighs. It was the temperature of the wooden floor.

This brought the same question to mind once more: why was she sitting on the floor?

And then…

"Brunhild!"

The familiar voice of the black cat stabbed into her ears and her shoulder's jumped.

She came back to her senses. She understood the situation. And then she felt strength fill her body. That feeling in her back, shoulders, arms, waist, and legs brought back her determination.

What can I do? she thought as she shot to her feet.

And then she saw the black cat leaning into the cardboard box.

"What are-…?"

Before she could say "you doing", the cat stopped her by looking up at her. Its gaze was straightforward and its eyes contained no calm.

"Brunhild."

Brunhild wanted to stop it from speaking any more, but it opened its mouth regardless.

"It's still alive."

"Eh…?"

Brunhild's vision suddenly started to grow distorted, but she steadied her breathing and asked a question.

"What do you mean?"

"It looks like some of the food got caught in its throat. And I think it's hungry as well. Get the tweezers."

Brunhild began to search for the tweezers. She was panicked, so it took her several seconds to remember she had left them next to the cardboard box. When she faced forward with them in hand, the cat was lightly holding the bird in place with its front paws.

The bird's beak opened and something yellow was visible within.

"You couldn't swallow it, could you?"

Brunhild used the tweezers to grab the piece of corn stuck in the bird's throat. She pulled, but failed twice due to using too little force. If she pulled too strongly, she could injure the bird's throat.

Brunhild dipped the tip of the tweezers in the bird's water. She then slowly grabbed the food and pulled it out. The piece was smaller than the pieces she had given it that evening.

The cat sighed and said, "It probably is not used to taking food from a dish yet. If the food isn't fed to it from above, the food can't get through its throat. …Look, it's breathing, but weakly. What should we do?"

Brunhild thought on that question.

What should she do? She thought and began speaking what sounded right to her in the order the ideas came to her.

"We need to lightly wrap it in cloth, warm it up, and give it some food…"

"You can't exactly feed it in this state."

That comment troubled Brunhild. The cat was exactly right. What could she feed it?

She did not know.

"But at this rate…"

It was no good. That was why Brunhild made up her mind. She placed her hands on the cardboard box.

"I will find someone who knows what they are doing."

"Is there anyone like that here? You're almost all alone in the dorm, remember? You've also been all alone with your club activities because of spring break."

"But this is my only option."

"Well, first you need to change."

Brunhild looked down and realized she was still wearing the black clothes of a witch.

"It's all over for us if we draw too much suspicion," added the cat.

"But," began Brunhild before gritting her teeth.

She ground her teeth together, but nodded.

"I am from 1st-Gear…"

She walked over to and opened the locker. Requiem Sense greeted her with a dull light, but she said nothing. She grabbed the uniform lying below it and placed it atop the work desk.

She removed the black clothes. She realized clothes perfectly fitted to her body were inconvenient when it came to quickly removing them.

Fifteen seconds. It took that long for Brunhild to strip off the black clothes. She opened the curtain as she grabbed the shirt of her uniform. No light was coming from the school buildings or girls' dorm visible out the window.

Was no one there or were they sleeping? Would they help her? As she stared into the darkness with those thoughts filling her mind, she thought her knees would give out. She shook her head, looked up, and realized the hand holding her shirt was trembling.

She heard silence. Nothing but silence

Brunhild held the sleeve between her teeth as she passed her hand through it and a muffled voice leaked out.

“What am I supposed to do…?”

Late at night, Sayama passed through the entrance of the second year general school building on his way to the Kinugasa Library.

He had been on his way back from a convenience store just outside the main entrance of the academy. The bag hanging from his hand contained packing tape, two drinks in plastic bottles, and a bit of light food like rice balls.

Shinjou Setsu was currently unpacking his luggage in their room. During the short period in which the floor was unusable, Sayama had gone out with Baku to buy a late-night meal, but he had noticed the Kinugasa Library’s lights were on when he had returned.

"I thought we locked up for the night when Shinjou-kun arrived earlier…"

…Could it be that someone from 1st-Gear has arrived?

A glance at his watch told him it was 2:01 AM. The atmosphere of the night put Sayama on guard as he walked through the dark central lobby.

Baku glanced around to the left and right as he rode on Sayama's shoulder. The small creature may have been acting as a lookout. Sayama smiled at the small bit of reassurance that gave him. He then felt tension within his own body and a slight phantom pain from the scars on his left hand.

When he pictured himself objectively, his smile transformed into a bitter one.

"I am walking through the school at night with a convenience store bag in hand while preparing myself for an enemy attack."

…What am I doing?

But the world had become a very dangerous place for him.

The source of that danger came from the Leviathan Road and the decision of whether to take part in it or not was drawing near.

What should I do? he wondered as he leaned against the wall. If he turned left at the next corner, he would be in the hallway passing in front of the Kinugasa Library.

He would then know why the lights were on. Sayama nodded and looked forward.

He saw only darkness.

The dark emptiness before his eyes suddenly brought the previous day's battle to mind.

He recalled the forest, the heavy breathing, the werewolf, and that werewolf's expression just before the conclusion.

"…"

At that time, he had chosen to defeat his enemy and Shinjou behind him had not.

But that werewolf's expression made him question whether it had truly been necessary to defeat it.

And it had been the same today. He had chosen to fight and Shinjou had chosen to save.

But had it truly been necessary to defeat that knight and the others?

Sayama remained silent. He thought of Shinjou, partially closed his eyes, and thought to himself.

…I was wrong.

Why had he been unable to make any choice but the one he had?

…If I could make the decision Shinjou-kun made, I would likely be more confident.

But that was something that could never happen. And so he must not think it.

"How can I hold pride in my own decisions?"

That was something his grandfather had not taught him.

And it was necessary. Not just to join the Leviathan Road, but to get serious about anything.

He took a breath. He opened his eyes and immediately began to move.

He made his way down the hallway in front of the Kinugasa Library while keeping his footsteps silent. He checked on the situation. The door was open and he could see inside. The library looked bright and empty.

"…"

He entered, closed the door behind him, and crouched down. The convenience store bag would make noise, so he tightly grabbed it lower than the handles to hold the contents in place.

He faced forward and spotted Siegfried next to the counter at the entrance.

The tall old man was asleep. He was sitting shallowly in his chair, his arms were folded above his stomach, and he looked perfectly peaceful.

A convenience store bag identical to the one Sayama held and an empty bento were placed on the counter.

"…So that is what happened."

Sayama stood up and sighed. Red flames were visible in the small potbelly stove placed next to the old man. Sayama felt warmth coming from those flames and he waved his arms to relieve the tension from before.

Baku stretched atop his shoulder. He must have been tense as well because he let out a sigh.

"We certainly get along," muttered Sayama as he stroked Baku's head.

Immediately afterwards, Sayama's vision slid away from the scene before his eyes.

Sayama saw a dimly-lit area.

It was not the Kinugasa Library. It was a single wooden room measuring five meters square. A table sat in the center.

The room was filled with a slight crimson light. The light illuminated a high ceiling that left the slope of the roof bare. The walls did not reach the ceiling and the length of the joists suggested there were six rooms total. Sayama was within the largest of the rooms.

And then Sayama looked down at himself.

…I exist only as my vision once more.

This was the past being shown by Baku. Sayama did not know this place

Just as he began to wonder whose past it was, he noticed two figures across the table from him. The first was a young woman and the other was a man sleeping in a chair next to the table. The man had his back to Sayama .

The woman fixed the position of the blanket covering the man. The woman had long and soft red hair and a slender face. She wore a shirt and stole over a simple pale green dress.

Sayama thought it looked like an outfit from the Middle Ages as he looked over at the woman. From the lack of outward awareness in her actions and the way she walked on her tiptoes, Sayama could guess what sort of social status she belonged to. Suddenly, Sayama smiled. He had noticed a stain on the sleeve of her shirt.

…Is that paint?

He lowered his head in his mind and walked forward. He moved to the other side of the table where he could see the two.

A fireplace was located on the wall opposite the table. The fireplace had no firewood or fire.

…What?

A single slab of stone was placed in the fireplace.

The blue, slightly cracked slab was thirty centimeters square and it had a single word written on it. It was a foreign word that Sayama did not recognize. However, Sayama could sense the meaning of the word.

Fire.

The pale crimson light was being produced around the stone slab. It even produced heat and the flickering shimmer of a flame.

This told Sayama a certain truth: he was in 1st-Gear.

Sayama looked toward the two people in front of the fireplace. The woman was adjusting the hem of the sleeping man's blanket. From Sayama's new position, he could see the front of the man.

He was a young man. He had broad shoulders and a nicely-shaped nose. His hair was blond and short, and his eyes were closed in sleep. He wore long black clothes over his tall form which looked cramped in the chair.

Sayama recognized the man. And the woman adjusting the hem of the blanket spoke his name.

"Siegfried…"

With her back to Sayama, the woman suddenly tilted her head. She reached a hand past the blanket and underneath the chair. She seemed to have found something.

After a while, she slowly, slowly pushed her hand to the side underneath the chair. Something was hidden by the blanket there and she was pushing it out from under the chair.

What came into view was a birdcage. It was a new birdcage made from wooden branches tied together. A blue bird with a bandage around its right wing stood inside.

The woman sighed. She stood up with the birdcage in her arms and turned in Sayama's direction.

She looked down while frowning slightly. She sighed again before speaking.

"Nein begged him to do it, I'm sure. And he even made a cage…"

The language was the same one the knight and the others had spoken during the day. He was hearing the meaning rather than the actual words spoken.

The bird in the cage then looked up. It looked up at the woman from its branch and spread its un-bandaged left

wing. The wing bent into two at the middle. It gave a quick high-pitched chirp as it showed the woman its wing.

That chirp caused the woman to frantically turn toward Siegfried behind her.

He was asleep, but he turned his head a bit to the side and frowned.

The woman hurriedly placed the birdcage above the fireplace She ignored the bird that tilted its head as it looked at her. She covered the cage with a half-knit brown wool cloth.

She looked back and forth between the sleeping Siegfried and the chirping bird. She whispered toward the birdcage. Sayama smiled when he sensed her words meant “be quiet” and “go to sleep”.

The woman’s words must have gotten through to the bird because it quieted down after chirping a bit longer.

The woman let out a breath and spoke while bringing her arms around the birdcage.

“I suppose we have to keep it…”

"Yes," replied a quiet voice.

Sayama looked over just as the woman did. Next to the fireplace, an old man was poking his face in below the lintel leading to the passageway.

The old man's clothes were such a dark green they looked black. He was short and lean, the top of his head lacked any hair, and his face was covered in wrinkles, but his eyes held a powerful light.

The man entered the room and stood before the fireplace. He placed his hands on his lower back.

"Lady Gutrune, he is a soldier from another Gear. We must not let our guard down."

"But, Doctor Regin, he saved our village. And…" The woman, Gutrune, pointed toward the birdcage covered by the half-knit wool. "Why did he do that? He came to destroy this world, but he stopped the rampage by the mechanical dragon my father, the king, had you make and he also worked to heal that injured bird."

"…Where is Nein?"

"Sleeping…I think. After finishing dinner, she did nothing but listen to him play music on that instrument."

Gutrune looked toward the hallway and Sayama followed her gaze.

He could not see anything, but the old man named Regin followed her gaze as well.

"It has been a long time since that six-rowed keyboard has been played. What song did he play?"

"I did not recognize it. He said he had been taught it long ago in his hometown."

"So the other Gears have cultures much like ours."

"Yes," said Gutrune with a nod. She looked over at Siegfried and spoke more quietly. "That instrument had not been played for years, but that was because we had forgotten about it. We have been so busy ever since my father began tightening this Gear's defenses. …We have had to create the mechanical dragons, extract the concepts to create the Concept Core, and seal off or defend every entrance into 1st-Gear."

"What do you think of him, princess? Does a softhearted princess like you think he might have saved the village and rescued that bird so we would let our guard down?"

"Why would he need to do that for such a small world ? With his power, I think he could have easily destroyed everything without doing that. Yet he has not done so and is now working to learn our language."

"He said he came from a country with a similar language structure, similar terms, and similar written characters."

"Yes. And today, he taught us the meaning of the lyrics of that song he sang while playing the keyboard." Sayama saw Gutrune narrow her eyes as she watched Siegfried. "It was a holy song. It was not a song of demons as those suspicious of him say it is."

"Are you referring to me?"

"No, Doctor Regin. I would not say you are suspicious of him. You are merely skeptical of everything."

Gutrune then stroked Regin's bald head.

Regin stopped her with both hands and, unsure what to do with her arms, she crossed them.

"It seems men do not like it when you stroke their head."

"…Did you do the same to him?"

"Yes. When I taught him some words and he managed to get his meaning across. For some reason, he did not like it. Yet he always seems so happy when Nein does it. " Gutrune sighed but quickly composed herself and looked back toward Siegfried. "But is everyone in his Gear like him? Do they all end up saving people despite intending to fight?"

"You could perhaps say that he fights despite intending to save people."

"I suppose so. …But I see possibility in that. It may be dangerous with how vague an idea it is, but if there are a lot of people like him, perhaps they could actually save people in their attempts to destroy."

"Princess, your excellent upbringing leads you to think about things in such wonderful ways."

"But how about this? Could someone like him use the holy sword Gram you created? Would that holy sword with a will of its own choose a simple human to be its master?"

Suddenly, Gutrune turned in the direction of Sayama's vision.

"Hello," she said with her eyes curved like a bow. Her gaze directly met his own.

Soon thereafter, Sayama realized what had happened. She was speaking to the corner of the room behind him.

Sayama turned around and found a short figure in the darkness of the corner where the light from the fireplace did not reach.

It was a girl. She was short and slender. She had gray hair and purple eyes. She stood behind Sayama while looking up at Gutrune. She was trying to reach up to the birdcage on top of the fireplace.

Behind her, Gutrune spoke with a smile in her voice.

"Were you hiding it all this time? Do not worry. I will not take it away any more. If it is important enough to

you that you need to hide it and watch over it this late at night, you can take it with you to your room."

Those words put a smile on the girl's face. Gutrune let out a sigh that held no hint of disagreeableness.

"You need to thank him. Okay, Nein?"

That was the girl's name.

As soon as Sayama heard that short name, he awoke from the past as if waking from a dream.

Once he awoke from the past, Sayama found himself in the Kinugasa Library as before.

However, one thing had changed: Siegfried was now awake. He stood up from his chair and spoke.

"Did Baku show you the past?"

"You can tell?"

"We used to use the same method. You can see a considerable amount in only a few seconds."

Sayama checked the clock to find it was 2:03 AM. As Siegfried had said, only a small amount of time had passed.

Siegfried pulled a bottle of instant coffee out of the small refrigerator installed below the counter. He pulled two paper cups out from below the counter as well.

Sayama watched Siegfried grab the kettle from the potbelly stove.

"I thought Germans were picky about their coffee."

"One can be picky about quality and one can be picky about quantity. And I am not so unmannered that I insist on the highest quality in a place intended for books." He then pointed at a few hardcover books and documents sitting on the counter. "I am glad you are here. I found these while organizing the supply room. Look at that on top."

"?"

Sayama walked up to the counter while the smell of coffee permeated his nose.

After placing his convenience store bag on the counter, he noticed a photograph on top of the pile of documents and books.

It was a large black-and-white photograph in a wooden frame. It was old, stained, and the corner was wrinkled due to expansion. The left half must have sat in the light too much because it looked like it was covered by white fog.

"It is too faded to see very much…"

"It seems it was already in this state when my predecessor found it."

"So it was already too late. …Is this a commemorative photograph taken at some mountain?"

The location was a mountain somewhere. The background showed the sky as well as a forest and prairie down below.

On the surviving half of the photo, about 10 people were visible. Some wore military-looking uniforms, some

wore the samue of Buddhist monks, and some wore mountain climbing gear. Some of the people were woman.

Siegfried placed a cup on the counter for Sayama.

"This is from the days of the National Defense Department. After taking the photo, we discussed who looked most like a criminal. It was later used for decoration here because it was too dreary a place otherwise, but I never thought it would still be here."

"So who was ultimately decided to look most like a criminal?'

"I am forbidden to reveal that information under the conditions of the Leviathan Road."

"So you do not want to tell me," said Sayama with a sigh.

However, he felt a sudden palpitation in the left side of his chest. He brought his right hand to his chest and thought about the cause.

He quickly realized why. If this was a commemorative photograph of the National Defense Department…

"…Where is my grandfather?"

"He is next to me. Can you not see him?"

Sayama searched for the Siegfried he had seen in the past a moment before, but unfortunately, the very center was too stained to see well. Once he realized that, the pressure in his chest left like a receding wave.

He let out a breath.

And suddenly his eyes froze in place. He recognized the clothes of one figure in that black-and-white image of the past.

In the center of the back row, someone had their back to the camera. Sayama recognized the person looking up into the sky as the discoverer of Babel he had seen in his dream. It was a one-armed old man.

Siegfried noticed his gaze and said, "That is Tenkyou-sensei. …He founded this school. He said he lost his arm during the Russo-Japanese War."

"Every time I hear that name I cannot help but think that Tenkyou is a bit of strange name."

"I have heard theories that the name should actually be read as Amayoshi or Amayasu, but I never heard him use either of those. Those closest to him always called him Tenkyou."

"Reverence for heaven, hm?"[1]

"It seems it was such an over-the-top name that it embarrassed him. That is why we also suspected his family name of Kinugasa was also a fake. If I had to choose a word to describe him, it would be 'eccentric'."

"An excellent choice."

Sayama picked up the paper cup from the counter.

He drank the coffee which was of course bitter. He looked at the photograph and tasted the bitterness while listening to Siegfried.

"At any rate, he enjoyed teasing people. Everyone fell victim to that at some point or another."

"Hearing you say that so seriously is enough to convince me."

Sayama placed the photograph back on the counter and began walking though the library. He was headed for the shelf with the books written by Kinugasa. It was not far away. He arrived almost immediately. The books he had looked at that morning were on the third row from the bottom.

He opened the first volume which discussed Norse legends. The text was written horizontally and from left to right.

"Wait…"

Sayama placed the book on a nearby table. With his left-arm unusable, Sayama realized something about the horizontally-written book.

"This is made so the pages can be easily turned with the right hand…"

"He really was a selfish person. He announced that he came from the Imperial Court, but I later learned that was a lie."

"This school was not made by a proper adult, was it?"

"He liked to brag and was very broad-minded. When he was involved with creating the National Defense Department, he was already researching the different mythologies of the world even before we learned of the Concept War. …He knew that the different Gears were fighting, but he waited until we realized it as well," said Siegfried. "He was the founder of this school and he was an authority in the fields of folklore and mythology. He is also the one who designed this library. During the National Defense Department days, he would often come here when he needed research material. I hear he concentrated mostly on mythology after discovering Babel, but he dealt more with technology when working with the Izumo Company. He was the one who constructed our earliest concept weapons."

Sayama looked at the other rows on the bookshelf and saw both books related to mythology and books related to engineering.

The mythology books were often about the ten mythologies of the different worlds, but there were also a lot related to the Bible.

"In other words… You could say our place here was created by the Concept War?"

"A lot happened back then."

Sayama nodded, returned the book to the shelf, and walked back to the counter.

Siegfried picked up the photograph on the counter.

"The National Defense Department became UCAT after World War Two. Until then, these were the primary members. Thinking back, we were truly devoted back then."

"Why did it become UCAT after the war?"

"Oh, UCAT was originally an American and European organization. They learned of our existence when Germany lost and they discovered some documents I had sent there. And after that, Japan was crushed by America."

"So Germany merely 'lost' while Japan was 'crushed'? "

"Germany only had its capital occupied. It never gave in."

"Isn't it a bit late to be that right-wing?"

"Do not worry about it," said Siegfried as he passed the photograph over the counter to Sayama. "At any rate, America and England arrived and discovered us. Each country had suffered losses to strange monsters that had appeared in the war. They created UCAT as a countermeasure. However, the National Defense Department's research and technology was superior to theirs."

"Well, of course it was. Thanks to the stimulation of the ley lines using the Divine States-World Interaction, Japan had more contact with the Concept War than any other country."

"Yes. They were at the stage of investigating what had happened while we had made our way to the actual battles. But for the sake of America's pride, the National Defense Department became Japanese UCAT and we agreed to cooperate with America. However, only those on the scene were sent in, so most of those that arrived from the victorious nations were crowded out. After quite a bit of conflict, we ultimately destroyed the other Gears."

Siegfried fell silent for several seconds before suddenly placing his cup on the counter.

The cup produced a solid noise as it struck the counter . By that time, the old man was already moving.

“?”

Sayama watched his long strides.

The tall man covered the distance from the counter to the door in only five seconds.

Before Sayama could ask what was the matter, Siegfried placed a hand on the doorknob and pulled it to the side.

Sayama thought he heard a voice at that time.

He did not know if Siegfried had muttered it or if it was a remnant of the past he had seen in the library, but the voice spoke a name Sayama remembered.

“Nein.”

With that quiet voice, the door slid open to reveal the cold hallway beyond.

Brunhild stood before the Kinugasa Library. The indoor shoes she wore were covered in outside dirt.

Her shoulders and the legs supporting her body were trembling slightly and she could not stop it.

The small bird in the cardboard box she held was lying on its side and breathing shallowly.

Brunhild's lips moved. No voice came out, but the movement of her lips formed the words she needed to say.

Please.

She had to say that one word.

She had gone to the cafeteria, the girls' dorm, and the faculty building, but she had not found anyone to speak that word to. This was the only place left. The Kinugasa Library was her only option. She had hurried here once she had realized that.

But now that she was here…

"…"

The trembling of her legs refused to stop, the ends of her eyebrows lowered, and her head hung down. She felt as if something heavy were sitting inside her stomach.

“Why?” she muttered in a trembling voice. “Why is it him again?”

But her lowered vision showed her the small bird.

Its breathing was shallow. When she saw the slight up and down movement of its body, Brunhild made up her mind.

With her body still trembling, she took a step toward the door.

Her footstep was quiet.

However, the response it received was forceful and loud.

The door slid open in front of her eyes.

The object before her eyes was removed and she saw light.

A tall shadow stood in the center of that light.

Siegfried Zonburg. That was the shadow's name.

His blue eyes looked straight at her and his expression was not even remotely harsh.

His beard-covered mouth moved as he asked a question. The voice sounded so very nostalgic to her.

"What is it?"

He then spoke her name.

"Brunhild Schild-kun."

He used her current name. As if in response to that, Brunhild's vision grew blurry.

"Ah…"

A breath escaped and it turned into a small cough. She had tried to speak the words she had prepared.

Please. Help this small bird.

She had to speak those words. She had to speak them firmly so her intention would be conveyed. And she had to ensure he did not learn of her identity.

She spoke. Or rather, she tried to.

"…"

Her lips trembled without moving, another breath escaped, and she audibly sucked it back in.

As her shoulders trembled and she began breathing heavily, she realized something was trailing down her cheek. It felt warmer than her body temperature.

What was it?

She did not know.

What she did know was what words she had to say. She looked forward. In her blurry vision, the figure standing before her of course looked blurred. Brunhild spoke to that man who seemed to have an indefinite form.

Please.

"Help…"

Help this small bird.

"Help…!"

As she spoke, a breath seemed to catch in her throat.

At that moment, something passed by at her feet. It was the sensation of a black cat. She looked down and the blurriness in her vision spilled down her cheek. As her vision grew a bit clearer, she saw the black cat rubbing its head against the man's shin. And she heard a voice from above.

"Understood. …I will help you."

Brunhild looked up. That movement caused something larger to fall from her eyes and her vision grew perfectly clear.

In her raised vision, she saw Siegfried. He was looking down at her. His angular face held no smile, anger, or sorrow. He was merely staring back at her.

Brunhild raised her still trembling voice in a question.

"Really?"

"It is true there are occasionally conflicts between us." He nodded and took a step to the side while inviting her

in with one hand. “However, you have come to me after admitting there is something you cannot do yourself. You formed words and tried to open this door. And it was all for someone other than yourself.” He took a breath. “That action takes courage. I have no reason to refuse you. And you have no reason to cry. After all, I will save this bird and the bird will thank you for making the right decision. …Come in, young girl. This was your decision.”

Once it became clear Siegfried was going to remain in the library all night, Sayama left and returned to his dorm.

Before he had left, Sayama had put new water in the kettle and bought three corn soups from a vending machine next to the school building.

…I really have become kind.

With that thought, he made his way to the second floor of the dorm building. He stepped out into the hallway and noted there was no luggage in front of the room anymore.

"Oh?"

He looked in and found the room's lights were off.

Did Shinjou-kun go to sleep ahead of me? he wondered as he walked through the door.

The room was illuminated by the pale moonlight and it had been cleaned up. A few of the boxes remained on the floor, but…

"Is this the luggage for the shared spaces?"

There was no sign Shinjou had touched the shelves to the side of the bed, the trunk next to the wall, or any of the other storage areas he shared with Sayama. Unopened boxes were sitting in front of them waiting to be unloaded.

I suppose I should have returned earlier, thought Sayama as he placed the convenience store bag on top of his desk.

He found a note on the desk. It was written on a piece of loose leaf paper. In the center, it said, "I am feeling tired, so I will go to sleep ahead of you. Sorry."

After reading the note, Sayama looked over at the bottom bunk. He saw Shinjou's silhouette lying atop the mattress.

…So this is what it is like to have a roommate.

When he nodded and placed the note back on the desk , Baku suddenly jumped down from his shoulder and onto the desk. Baku ran over and jumped to the desk that would be Shinjou's.

The writing equipment Shinjou had brought had been placed on the desk.

There was a red cloth pencil case, binders of loose leaf paper, and a notebook-style computer. There were two different types of loose leaf paper. One was lined and the other was Japanese-style manuscript paper.

Baku climbed onto one of the loose leaf paper binders and quickly went to sleep.

…Is that important to Shinjou-kun?

Baku did not respond or even turn toward Sayama. He was already curled up and fast asleep.

Sayama gave a small smile.

He looked forward toward his own desk and saw the study equipment he had used since the first year.

He reached out toward the corner of the desk. A single picture frame was placed there.

He grabbed the small wooden frame with his bandaged left hand and brought it into the moonlight.

The picture showed a large gym. It was brightly lit and a white winners' platform was placed at the bottom. The winner's platform was divided into three levels. Boys wearing karate uniforms stood at 1st place and 3rd place.

Sayama was not in the picture.

He silently returned the picture frame to its original spot. The scars on his left hand glowed white in the moonlight.

"…"

He heard a sudden noise. It was the sound of rustling cloth.

Realizing what it was, he turned toward the source of the sound.

The sound had been caused by Shinjou turning in his sleep on the bottom bunk.

Shinjou's hair was unbound and spread out across the bed's mattress. His body was bent in a shallow V-shape and a thin blanket covered him. He was wearing a white shirt.

The blanket had come off slightly, so his feet and white thighs were visible.

"Nn…"

A slight voice escaped his lips and his expression changed slightly.

With a short breath, he adjusted his position. His weak movements had deepened the V-shape of his body.

The blanket slid to the side and the white underwear covering his butt could be seen peeking out from under his shirt. Sayama visually followed the lines of his thighs,

one of which was slightly forward of the other. The lines continued in long curves that curved in all the right places.

Sayama looked at the white underwear covered butt and tilted his head.

"Is that really not Sadame-kun?"

He brought a hand to his chin and thought. He realized he would know once and for all if he removed the underwear before his eyes.

And he continued to think.

He thought on the situation, the suddenness of it, what would happen afterwards, and how he could handle the aftermath. And he finally decided on a plan.

"If I explain the situation, he will understand."

He gave a deep nod and felt those words held great persuasive power.

His doubts were gone. He now began to take action. He leaned over the bed as if covering Shinjou with his own body.

He then began to reach toward the cloth displaying the round shape of Shinjou's butt.

But then a quiet voice escaped Shinjou's lips. He spoke in a trembling, broken voice.

"…Sorry."

Sayama raised his head and looked toward Shinjou's face.

Shinjou was frowning and casting down his closed eyes. His mouth opened slightly as he spoke.

"I am always wrong…"

His partially disturbed breathing sucked in the words. He could no longer speak, but his expression remained unchanged.

Sayama recalled the words Shinjou had spoken and shook his head.

For the past few days, he had been trying to give meaning to what people said in their sleep.

…Am I that vague a person?

Sayama looked at Shinjou's face, but he spoke as if as a warning to himself.

"That is not the case. …I guarantee it."

As he spoke, Sayama used his outstretched hand to grab the blanket. He placed it back over Shinjou's body.

He then lightly tapped Shinjou's back. He did so slowly as if lulling a child to sleep.

"Nn…"

Shinjou's breathing gradually grew steadier. However, the stern expression did not leave his face.

This is my limit for now, realized Sayama.

Sayama nodded in understanding and got up from the bed. He looked out the window and saw the white moon in the sky. Sayama opened his mouth to speak as he looked at the moon sending out moonlight that could be called cold.

"I am acting unlike myself, but this may be my only chance to do so. Will I continue to be hated until my

body is destroyed or will I give up on everything? …I must choose one or the other before long.”

He reached his left hand out toward the moon. The pain in his bandaged left arm ran up through his shoulder and into his head.

However, Sayama spread his scarred left hand and then clenched it into a fist as if grasping the moon.

He let out a breath and some words.

“What are the conditions for being a villain?”

Chapter 17: Tranquil Flowers

Chapter 17

“Tranquil Flowers”

Peaceful, peaceful, peaceful
The noisier the person, the more they desire silence
The noisier the person, the more they sink into silence

Peaceful, peaceful, peaceful

The noisier the person, the more they desire silence

The noisier the person, the more they sink into silence

Brunhild's awakening began with surprise.

A slight sensation suddenly came to her right cheek.

"…!"

Her shoulders shook and she opened her eyes. She looked at her right shoulder, but saw nothing there.

What was that? she wondered as she saw an unfamiliar scene. She was not in her usual dim dorm room. The ceiling was tall and bookshelves were lined up. She could see the light of morning.

The clock on the wall was larger than the one in her dorm room and it read 6:30 AM. Seeing that time caused

her to panic slightly. Her panic raised her heart rate which swept away the last of her drowsiness. A clear question floated up in her mind.

"Where am I?"

This was not her dorm room. It was some other place. It was somewhere larger and warmer.

She focused on her vision, but all she could see were the tall ceiling, the bookshelves, and the large space. However, Brunhild recognized it. Her memories took the form of words.

"The library counter."

She was sleeping on a chair rather than a bed. The fact that she had fallen asleep, the stove next to her, and the green blanket someone had placed over her all made her feel she had failed.

However, she wondered how long it had been since someone had last placed a blanket over her. She had just woken up, but she placed the blanket over her shoulder where it had slipped down some and gave herself in to its warmth.

As she did, she saw what had woken her. A small form stood on the blanket near her chest.

The sunlight entering through the window between two bookshelves and the light from the ceiling illuminated a small bird with a blue head and black wings.

Brunhild's eyes met with the bird's. The bird raised its tail and chirped quietly.

Brunhild stopped moving.

"Ah…"

A small voice escaped her lips and the ends of her eyebrows lowered.

She moved her hands to lift up the blanket and gently held the bird through the blanket.

With a creak from the chair, Brunhild stood up. The small bird tilted its head on top of her hand and the blanket. It pecked at the inside of its wings, but it otherwise remained still.

"You can jump out of the box, but you still can't fly, can you?"

Brunhild held her hand out toward the cardboard box.

The bird jumped from the slope of the blanket and into the box.

The state of the box's contents had changed from the night before. The food dish now had tiny yellow grains in it.

It was millet. Siegfried would scatter it for the birds in the morning and it appeared the bird had pecked at it some while Brunhild slept. However, the bird looked up at Brunhild and opened its upturned mouth.

A comment on the bird came from the side.

"It seems to have taken a liking to you."

That low voice was followed by a white paper cup in an outstretched hand. Both steam and a slightly sour smell rose from the cup. It contained coffee.

Brunhild turned toward the person holding out the cup.

A tall old man stood there. It was Siegfried. He nodded once.

"After drinking this, take your bird and cat and leave," he said to emphasize what she should do.

The old man placed the cup on the counter.

He turned his back, put out the stove, and began organizing the objects below the counter.

Brunhild placed the blanket over the chair and woke the black cat sleeping curled up below the chair. The cat stood up and looked around. Its sleepy eyes turned toward Siegfried's back.

The cat nodded once and tapped at Brunhild's leg.

It pointed its front right leg toward Siegfried before bringing its front paws together as if in prayer.

Brunhild nodded and stood.

"Um," she muttered under her breath. She touched her face to find it held the same expressionless look as ever. Her hair was disheveled, but she decided it was within acceptable limits. She picked up the cup from the counter and took a sip of coffee.

She felt as if this was the first time in a long time that she had tasted actual food or drink. The remnants of her tension had left an odd iron taste in her mouth, but the coffee washed it away.

The taste seemed to warm her body. After drinking the entire cup of coffee, she realized there had been sugar at the bottom. But she could not have done anything about it because she had no spoon. She almost gave a bitter smile toward the crouching back that continued to organize things below the counter.

"…"

She regained her proper expression. The cup produced a light noise as she placed it on the counter. She knew what she had to say.

"Sorry about…last night."

"You mean your sudden visit?"

"There is that," Brunhild replied to the back's question . "But you kept me warm even after I fell asleep and you gave me soup…"

"My help was already over by the time you fell asleep. Do not worry about it. You asked me for help. At that point, you only needed to fall asleep."

As he spoke, Siegfried picked up some documents.

As he slowly turned around, Brunhild tried to take a silent step back. However, something pressed up against the back of her lower leg. It was the black cat's back.

Brunhild stopped moving backwards. She faced Siegfried. He was two heads taller than her. Brunhild looked up at his blue eyes. His eyes held no emotion and Brunhild realized the look in his eyes was the same as hers.

She felt danger. Not from him but from her past. Holding any more emotional bonds was dangerous.

And so she lowered her head in order to avert her gaze .

"Thank you very much."

She thought about what to do next. First, she would raise her head. Second, she would pick up the bird's box. Third, she would turn around. Fourth, she would casually kick the black cat. And fifth, she would walk to the door. She began to implement this plan.

And she was suddenly stopped at the very first step.

"…Ah."

When she began to raise her head, something large gently pressed down on it from above.

It was Siegfried's hand. He was stroking her head.

"You did well."

She could feel her cheeks reddening at his words and the sensation passing through her hair.

"P-please stop that."

She shook her head and tried to place her hands on her head in order to escape his hand. She hurriedly placed her arms on the cardboard box for the small bird so she could carry it. She turned around.

And when she turned her head to glance back, she saw Siegfried with the exact same look on his face as before.

"My apologies."

Those words caused Brunhild to realize why she had avoided him.

She averted her gaze, fully turned her back to him, and lowered the edges of her eyebrows.

"No… I was just a bit surprised."

"I used to know a girl who loved it when I did that."

Brunhild shut her eyes when she heard that statement.

"…Zonburg-san?" she said.

"What is it?"

"Why did you decide to save this bird last night?"

"Because you-…"

"You decided to save the bird because I asked you to?"

After she cut off Siegfried's answer with that question, she received a short silence in response.

Brunhild took a breath. She took one, two, three, four, five breaths. On the fifth, she received her answer.

"It is a means of atonement for me. Even if it is going against the law of nature…"

Brunhild opened her eyes and listened to his voice.

"I do not want to lose what cannot be regained."

Brunhild moved slightly when she heard that. She brought the arms carrying the box closer to her chest and walked toward the door.

All strength had left her body without her realizing it.

As she wondered why, Brunhild reached the door and opened it.

Siegfried's voice arrived from behind.

"If anything else happens or you need to leave for a bit , you can leave the bird with me."

Brunhild nodded and walked out into the hallway. She closed the door. This was a school hallway, but it was the early morning during spring break. The entranceway was dimly lit and the air was cold.

That darkness and chilliness awoke her body rather than her mind.

And even though her body woke, it still felt weak.

Brunhild sighed. She walked to the central lobby and leaned up against the wall. She felt the box up against her chest and the cold wall against her back. The bird's chirping and the coldness on her back caused her body to tremble.

The black cat arrived at her feet.

"Are you okay? Maybe you should rest in the art room instead of walking back to the dorm."

"Yes," said Brunhild with a nod.

She sucked in a breath, looked up at the ceiling, opened her mouth, and straightened her throat.

I look like the small bird asking for food, she thought.

She brought air into her lungs and contemplated why her body felt so weary.

She did not know.

But she did understand one thing: Siegfried.

"Atonement…"

Brunhild closed her eyes and mouth and lowered her face.

She closed herself up but thought with her heart. She thought on what she had learned after sixty years:

He had not forgotten either.

The large clock on the school wall indicated it was 9:00 AM.

It was spring break, so the bell did not ring. Instead, a motorcycle engine could be heard.

A black touring motorcycle passed through the main entrance and continued toward the parking lot behind the dorms. A couple rode it. They were Izumo and Kazami.

The motorcycle engine ceased to rev as it came up alongside the line of school buildings. With his brown coat fluttering in the wind, Izumo gripped the clutch letting the engine go free. He placed his heel on the ground and lowered their speed.

He removed his helmet with his right hand and muttered to no one in particular.

"…So being stubborn will leave you sleep deprived."

"Sorry about having you come with me," said Kazami who was riding tandem.

Izumo stopped the motorcycle and turned around. The girl wearing a warm sleeveless top and a men's leather jacket held her helmet along with her rucksack.

Kazami's expression had her eyebrows bent downwards a bit. Nevertheless, she had a smile on her lips. After seeing her face, Izumo looked forward once more.

"Well, I'll stick with you until we get an agreement."

"Sorry. I think it will be like this at least until Sayama decides for himself."

"Really, it doesn't bother me that much. Will your friend have the new song done in time for the Zenren Festival in May? We're already printing posters for the school band competition."

"We have enough songs stocked up. And if it comes down to it, I can head home and beg for help from my father, so everything will be fine."

"Really?"

Izumo glanced back to see Kazami nod and change her expression. Her eyebrows rose slightly and her eyes looked straight up at him.

"Friends are important, but there is something else we need to prioritize. Let's start there."

"The Leviathan Road?"

"Yes. As the ones who are already involved, isn't there something we should be showing him?"

"Yeah, I can think of some things he would want to see . Like-…Ah, wait! I didn't say anything yet!"

"Tch. You're getting smarter."

Kazami lowered the right fist she had raised in order to tear into Izumo.

She sighed. The collar of her jacket slipped from her limp shoulder.

Something other than skin was visible on Kazami's bared right shoulder.

Izumo reached out his hand without warning. He placed the hand on Kazami's slightly cold collarbone.

"Ah…What is it?"

Kazami cowered down a bit as she wrapped her arms around her rucksack and helmet, but Izumo quickly moved his hand to her shoulder. As she looked up with a troubled expression, he showed her what he held between his fingers.

It was a small yellow flower petal.

"…"

Kazami's expression clouded over when she saw its color and shape. She cast her eyes down a bit and her eyebrows drooped.

Izumo sighed.

"Chisato."

"Hm? Wh-what?"

When she opened her mouth to speak, Izumo suddenly shoved his finger and the flower petal inside her mouth.

"Nn!" gasped Kazami before swallowing the flower petal.

Izumo pulled out his finger and said, “Listen. That gloomy look isn’t like you at-…Ow ow ow! Dammit, now this is more like you!”

“Shut up! Why would you do that all of a sudden!?”

“You don’t like it all of a sudden? Okay, next time I’ll ask permission first.”

“That! Is! Not! The! Issue!!”

Kazami’s repeated blows rang out in staccato. She struck him in the body, hit his face with a left-handed backhanded blow to the left when his head stuck forward, hit him in his unguarded right flank with a hook, and began a left-handed uppercut.

“Oh?”

But she stopped there. Izumo took a breath while waiting for the uppercut that should have come.

“H-huh? This feels inadequa-…no, I mean. What’s the matter, Chisato?”

"I hear an organ," replied Kazami as she pointed toward the second year general school building which they could see the back of from there.

Izumo turned an ear in that direction and realized he could hear it, too. It was coming from the music room on the second floor of the building.

"Is that Silent Night? You do hear it on occasion. Does that room have bad soundproofing or something?"

"No music room would have bad soundproofing. Look, the window is open."

Izumo looked up toward the second floor and the music room's window was indeed open.

"See?" said Kazami. "The art room and music room actually have excellent soundproofing. We use the music room for practice, so I know."

"You say that, but we sure could hear that bird from above while in the Kinugasa Library yesterday."

"It must have passed through the ventilation. …You never hear anything while up above because the library's

supply room is always quiet." Kazami's gaze stopped on the third floor. "That's unusual. One of the art room's curtains is open. …Oh, it's Schild's black cat."

Drawn in by Kazami's last word more than anything else, Izumo looked up at the art room's window on the third floor. A single black cat sat in the window. The cat did not seem to have noticed them. Kazami held her helmet up against her chest.

"How cute. That kind of cat is just perfect for a completely cement-like German girl like Schild."

"I think the things you say are a lot more cement-like …"

The instant Izumo looked over at Kazami, she gasped and her eyes opened wide in surprise.

Izumo followed her gaze to the art room window to find the curtain closed.

"K-K-K-Kaku?"

"What?"

"Th-the cat just closed the curtain. It closed it. It really did!"

"How?"

"I-it stood up, grabbed it with its paws, and tugged like this."

"I see. …You seem to be having a hard time of it, Chisato."

Without saying anything more, Izumo faced forward and kicked off the ground to begin driving once more.

"Now, then. Let's head back and get some sleep."

"Please believe me!!"

As Izumo's back shook from repeated blows, he muttered with an annoyed expression.

"Is it really that surprising in the world we live in?"

Sayama arrived at an IAI-affiliated hospital located across the Tama River from IAI.

Shinjou had come from the IAI lobby and brought him to the central of the five white buildings making up the hospital. Shinjou showed a card at the reception desk and they were led to a staircase to the side of the reception desk.

They walked down approximately five floors and passed through a few barriers that opened up before them. They arrived at a stairway that split off in two directions and Sayama followed Shinjou down the left path. There he found…

"A room? Is it a waiting room leading to a large hall?"

At the end of the staircase were a small cement room and a dark space that opened beyond it.

The northern end of the room had a large elevator, but the floor number display did not go up to the first floor. It ran from B3 down to B7.

Sayama frowned at the atmosphere of the room. Baku's nose twitched from where he sat on Sayama's shoulder.

Sayama recognized the smell in the room. It was the scent of incense. He had recently smelled it at his grandfather's funeral.

And he could hear the sounds of an air conditioner.

Both the smell and the sounds came from the dark space beyond the room.

The room had a stone sink with running water, a trashcan next to it, and a waiting room sofa. The trash can contained tall, withered flowers and white cloth.

"…"

Shinjou turned around in the center of the room to face Sayama. She removed her brown jacket to reveal a black shirt and black trousers below. Only the scarf around her neck was white.

"U-um. This is my second time, but…well…this is…"

"You do not have to say it. If you had told me we would be coming here, I would have worn mourning clothes."

"Ooshiro-san told me to bring you by before the negotiations. He raised his thumb like this."

"Is that why you do not look very cheerful today? You did not seem to be listening when I told you about your brother's arrival."

"Oh, th-that's right. Sorry. Here, take this."

Shinjou pulled a black necktie and a small plastic bag from the inner pocket of the jacket hanging from her hand. The necktie was for the funeral and inside the plastic bag was…

"These are the objects I had on me the day before yesterday."

It contained an IAI cell phone that could record audio and video with its microphone and camera, a handheld digital voice recorder, and a black leather seal case.

"I was told the pens and broken watch were sent in for analysis."

Sayama first took the plastic bag and opened it. The handheld recorder's battery was dead.

"Did someone accidentally switch it on?"

He placed it in his pocket along with the cell phone and seal before placing the plastic bag on the sofa.

Sayama removed his current necktie in an instant and took the black necktie from Shinjou.

He tilted his head, wrapped the tie around his neck, and tied it.

"Oh, it's a bit crooked."

Shinjou walked over and grabbed the tie.

As she held the knot in place with her right hand, the ring on her middle finger glittered a bit. Shinjou fixed the tie, took a step back, gave a small groan, and fixed it once more. She asked a question as she moved the base of the tie.

"How was Setsu?"

"It seems he decided to visit back home this morning. He was gone when I woke up."

"Oh, um, that isn't what I meant. What did you think of him?"

"I try not to speak about people when they are not present."

That put a bitter smile on Shinjou's face. She stroked Baku's head as he sat on Sayama's shoulder.

"That is just like you, Sayama-kun."

"Is it? Well, there are some people for whom I have partially removed that restriction. Izumo and the old man, for example."

"That is also just like you," said Shinjou with a grin. She then asked, "Setsu said that you are a strange person."

"Oh, that is probably because I suddenly checked over his body. It may have been a bit too soon for that."

"I want to know what you think 'a bit' means…"

"Do not worry about it. I did it because I thought Setsu-kun might be you."

"Eh?" asked Shinjou.

Sayama replied, "Last night, I thought about removing Setsu-kun's underwear while he slept to see if he was you."

"S-Sayama-kun? …Are you crazy?"

"How rude. …How about I ask you why you are tying my necktie with a smile on your face?"

"Am I not allowed to do that? And, well, Setsu is a boy . You understand what I mean, right?"

"Yes, I do. And I have only just met him. That is why I have a request for you instead."

"Eh? What is it?"

"I memorized the bodylines of Setsu-kun's legs and butt last night. I would like to compare them to your body, so I can-…"

Before he could finish speaking, his tie was tightened to its limit.

A few minutes later, Sayama and Shinjou bowed in greeting and entered the next room. It was quite large. Stone platforms were arranged in four rows and five columns. Seven of them were currently in use.

Six of them were covered with white cloth and one was covered with black cloth.

Each of the cloths had flowers placed next to them. However, one of the white cloths was decorated with a light purple flower Sayama did not recognize.

"That is Primula modesta. It was growing in a flower bed behind UCAT. Sibyl, who is in charge of communications and maintenance, was picking them earlier. You haven't met her yet have you, Sayama-kun? …I bet those flowers are from her."

"I see. Who are these six?"

"The members of the advance unit. They pursued that werewolf. Their normal duty is that of guards, but they requested to be sent out because it was an emergency. It is UCAT's job to capture suspicious people and radicals."

And to know how that turned out, I only need to look in front of me, thought Sayama. *So this is why Shinjou-kun told me I should decline the Leviathan Road.*

Shinjou pulled an unopened package of incense sticks and a lighter from her back trouser pocket. The cheap and well-used lighter belonged to Ooshiro. It had his name and its intended location ("On top of the TV") written in marker.

She lit it.

The two of them each placed an incense stick next to and brought their hands together at each of the six stone platforms.

"We have permission from the families of that one and that one, so you can look at them."

"I see."

Sayama pressed his hands together once more before lifting up the cloth. He did not hesitate and he was not surprised. After his time with the Tamiya family and his grandfather, he had seen the same thing a few times.

However, this was the first time he had seen a body that had been ripped apart by a beast.

The first body looked as if the area from below the neck on the right to the left flank had been dug out with a shovel. It must have been gouged out by a poor-quality blade because white fragments of bone were visible within the blackened folds of flesh.

The second body had no visible external wounds aside from three large ones and some bruising on the head. However, the neck and abdomen had sunk in like a deflated balloon. That area must have been crushed with a powerful blow.

Sayama replaced the cloth and placed his hands together again. Shinjou did the same next to him.

Shinjou had said this was her second time, but her face still looked pale. Sayama showed no concern, however.

In this place, the dead took precedence.

Shinjou glanced over at the cloth hiding one of the bodies.

"It seems this incident has led to some second thoughts about the current system. Specifically, the entrance requirements for the special and standard divisions, the division of work, and the process for dealing with this sort of situation if it happens again."

"If someone dies, how is their family told?"

"Official employees are said to be overseas while on active duty. In that case, the family is told there was an ' accident' while they were on guard duty in a dangerous part of the world. Any family members that are in UCAT are simply told the truth."

"What if a student like Kazami died?"

"She is not connected to UCAT or IAI, so it would be said she was in an accident." Shinjou looked up at Sayama. "Are you mad?"

"Of course not. It is only natural for a corporation to protect itself. And… With a conflict like this, they would never understand if you tried to tell the truth. I am sure each country's UCAT works with the government and corporations to keep certain information hidden."

"Yes," said Shinjou with a nod.

Shinjou then looked toward the one remaining cloth. This was the black cloth located at a distance from the others.

Sayama had a guess who was below that cloth.

"Is that the werewolf from the day before yesterday?"

"Yes," affirmed Shinjou.

She handed Sayama a piece of cloth she took from her back pocket. It was white canvas. It had something written on it with black paint.

"Placing this by the body on your first visit is the 1st-Gear custom."

Sayama looked over and saw that a number of the pieces of cloth were placed at the body's feet while the flowers were placed next to the head.

While Sayama placed the cloth, Shinjou dipped her finger in a glass cup of water placed next to the flowers. She let water drip down onto the cloth covering the chest .

Sayama did the same.

As he let the cold water drip down, his gaze stopped on the arrangement of the flowers.

In addition to the white flowers that had also been placed with the other six, there were two bouquets of yellow chrysanthemums. From the number of fallen flower petals, Sayama deduced that one bouquet had been brought the day before and the other today.

The water in the cup was cold and it contained no sediment or bubbles.

…So someone is properly watching over him.

Suddenly, his eyes moved to the stems of the chrysanthemum offerings. Each flower had a straight horizontal scrape fairly high up the stem.

Sayama sighed when he saw the slight watery green color in the scrapes.

"What is it, Sayama-kun?"

"Oh, it just seems I cannot help but be surrounded by softhearted people. But if that is who they want to be, I will go along with it."

"Eh?" asked Shinjou as she tilted her head.

"Do not worry about it," said Sayama.

He placed a hand on the top of the black cloth.

"Do we have permission for him?"

"Yes, we received it from both the peaceful faction and the ones we captured yesterday. …The Royal Palace Faction was it?"

"I see," said Sayama with a nod.

They likely wanted to go into the negotiations with no secrets.

He brought his hands together, bowed, and lifted up the cloth.

In his mind, he was picturing the werewolf's expression at the conclusion of their fight the day before yesterday.

…What will I think if that expression is still there?

He did not hesitate or show any surprise. He merely pulled the cloth down with that question in mind. However…

"A person?"

Below the cloth was a brown-haired foreign man. He had short, messy hair and an angular face. His eyes were closed, so his expression made it seem he was only sleeping.

Sayama heard Shinjou speak.

"The werewolves of 1st-Gear turn into wolves when they are tense. And they return to normal when that tension leaves. They can't actually turn into wolves within the concepts of Low-Gear, but a philosopher's stone making an inferior copy of 1st-Gear's writing concept was found in his stomach. …Can you see the traces of that fight?"

Sayama looked closer and noticed the man's lips were split and he had been stabbed in the center of the chest. The area around those wounds was burnt. That had been caused by Sayama's watch and ballpoint pen.

A line as wide as a business card cut through his left and right sides. That was from Kazami's sniper shot.

"Apparently, the peaceful faction gave permission to shoot to kill when they heard the situation."

"He killed himself in the end… He must have known he had no allies left."

Sayama placed the cloth back over the body.

He bowed and then glanced around the room. In that quiet, dimly lit hall were seven people who had already been lost.

…And the same could happen to me.

He thought for a moment and a single question came to him. This could happen to him, but if that did not happen…

"This could happen to someone else…"

"Eh?"

As Shinjou let out a questioning voice, she and Sayama exchanged a glance.

Sayama looked into Shinjou's black eyes and had a sudden thought:

Would Shinjou choose a battlefield on which she could be lost?

Chapter 18: Broken Horizon

Chapter 18

“Broken Horizon”

What are you going there to see?
Is that a question one can answer?
After all, that is what you are going there to find out

What are you going there to see?

Is that a question one can answer?

After all, that is what you are going there to find out

Sayama followed Ooshiro Kazuo to the 1st-Gear reservation. They climbed a hill behind UCAT.

They walked past UCAT transportation control, made their way through vegetable and flower gardens and a cedar forest, and finally arrived at a paved road. Ooshiro turned toward Sayama on that road. He flipped up the hem of his burnt white lab coat.

"Do you have anything with anything written on it or carved into it?"

Sayama was just about to answer when he suddenly looked toward the surrounding forest.

"…?"

Something is off, thought Sayama.

He had felt some sort of presence.

However, he could not see anything in the area. He found only silence.

“It certainly is quiet here.”

“Maybe that’s because we are near the concept space. But I visited here a few times a long time ago. And those times,” Shinjou tilted her head, “I remember hearing more birds.”

I need to be cautious, thought Sayama.

He nodded and answered the previous question.

“I decided to be cautious and avoided bringing any products with writing on them. But will electronics work inside?”

Sayama pulled his cell phone from his pocket. It had a microphone and a built-in camera that allowed it to record audio and video.

Sayama pointed at the camera and Ooshiro scratched at his head.

"Hmm, it should work. To prevent a rebellion, the reservation is based on Low-Gear concepts. If you are clever in how you use it, you might be able to give it extra ability from the concepts added to the reservation. But…"

"But it will not work as a phone, right? The phone tower exists outside."

"There are specialized devices that allow you to communicate outside, but they are quite valuable."

Hearing that, Sayama returned the cell phone to his suit's breast pocket. He kept the camera facing outwards.

Sayama then looked toward Ooshiro's left side. He held a laptop there.

When Ooshiro noticed, he tapped the gray body of the device and raised his right thumb.

"This is for recording what is said. The keyboard and switches are unmarked. At the press of a button, it can switch to a setting that does not display anything."

"I did not know you were that skilled with computers, old man."

Shinjou looked over toward Sayama. She was slightly out of breath from climbing the slight hill.

"He plays video games a lot in his room. But when SF, the others, or I try to look at the screen, he panics and switches off the display. I think Itaru-san scolded him about it once."

"…Is that so?"

"Yes. And the walls in Ooshiro-san's room are covered in long vertical posters. They all have gaudy drawings of lewd girls."

After thinking on what Shinjou had said, Sayama looked over at Ooshiro. He turned a small smile toward that man carrying a laptop.

"Old man."

"D-do you need something?"

"I will say this in an indirect way: you will not die in any decent way, you perverted old man."

"Wow, you really said it. …And Shinjou-kun, you shouldn't tell on people!"

"Eh? B-but I thought an hour of video games a day was an acceptable way of extending your hobbies." With her head tilted, Shinjou pulled what looked like a card out of her back pocket. "I have this. It isn't the same as yours, but it is a handheld game system UCAT gave me."

Sayama took it from her and realized it was a small game device with an LCD screen. The black and white LCD screen was located in the center, a single round button was located on either side of the screen, and it had two selection buttons. From the patterns visible on the LCD screen, the game involved people jumping down from a building which the player had to bounce into an ambulance with a stretcher.

"It has a clock mode and the game has a normal A Mode and a hard B Mode. I got the max score in A Mode once, but the battery died and my high score was lost."

Sayama nodded in understanding as he listened, but then he spoke to Ooshiro.

"I just now realized that it is UCAT's doing that Shinjou-kun is so strange, but what am I supposed to do about it?"

"I-I'm not strange."

"You have been brainwashed. Video games are normally played on the television or with a color LCD screen."

"Eh? You can play games on TV?"

"Old man! This has reached the level of personality modification!"

"I'm not actually sure how this happened either," he said. "I can only think people have been giving her what they have to spare."

"I see," said Sayama with a nod. He returned the handheld game system to Shinjou. "Take care of this. … But get ready because I will make sure Setsu-kun educates you on this. I think I have some things in storage that a graduate left behind."

"Eh? Y-you don't have to do that. I would feel bad."

"No, this is an excellent chance to teach you that you do not live in the Showa era."

Sayama sighed and continued forward. As Ooshiro walked in front of him, the man suddenly disappeared.

Sayama frowned and wondered what had happened, but then the watch on his left wrist suddenly vibrated.

—Writing is a representation of power.

He heard a voice and red words scrolled across the face of the watch.

Sayama realized this was the same concept text he had heard at the Imperial palace.

But he felt as if nothing had changed.

The scenery around him had barely changed. The types of trees were slightly different and the smell of earth was a bit stronger, but that was all. He could not help but compare it to the concept space that had caused the direction of gravity to change.

“This is a bit underwhelming.”

“Not all of them are quite so exciting.”

He looked over to find Ooshiro and Shinjou standing next to him.

Sayama nodded and they began walking once more. Beyond the forest on either side of the path were fields of crops.

Sayama continued walking along the earth between the trees as he looked at the crops in the distance. He soon came to the top of the hill.

The visible area opened up before him.

Above were the blue sky and the white clouds and below was a village. The fields on either side of the path continued on to the village.

Most of the trees had been left intact in the village and several houses had been built among them. Most of those houses were made of built up stones with cement filling the gaps. The roofs were made of wood. A small vegetable garden and storage shed existed next to each house.

An even more open area existed beyond the trees and houses. A green sea was visible there.

"Wheat?"

"Yes. Some potatoes and other things are grown individually. Growing crops in a concept space can be unstable. About twenty years ago, large amounts of soil was brought in from outside so they could be self-sufficient."

"Is that part of UCAT's job?"

"Yes, but UCAT's budget is limited. For anything more than that, the reservation residents need to earn it themselves. They do so by sharing techniques and knowledge or by working in UCAT. And if they wish to be naturalized, we will gladly help them."

"Is that because the fewer the people in the reservation , the easier it is to keep them fed?"

Just as Ooshiro nodded in response, a low voice called out from the field to the side.

"Yes. And if we are to welcome in new members, we must send out those who can leave."

The figure that climbed up to the pathway was huge. Sayama looked up at that two meter figure.

"A dragon?"

In front of him was a humanoid dragon covered in a black shell and skin.

His pointed face and sharp eyes were turned toward Sayama. The low shoulders below his fairly long neck were covered by a simple white outfit that had a fisherman's vest worn over it. On his feet were…

"Jika-tabi?"

They were the type sold cheaply in supermarkets. The toes were covered in dirt and moss.

He must have noticed Sayama's gaze because Fasolt opened his mouth and laughed from the throat. He kicked the ground to knock off the dirt and moss and shook the flowers and straw in his left arm.

"These shoes work best with the three claws I have received from the reign of the dragon god. They also work well with agricultural work. Don't you agree? What is your name, human youth and boy of Low-Gear? I am Fasolt, the leader and storyteller of this 1st-Gear reservation."

His lungs must have been able to hold a lot of air because the words all came at once.

Sayama saw Baku ball up his tail and pull back his hips where he stood on Sayama's shoulder.

"I am Sayama Mikoto. It seems I am the tentative Low-Gear representative. It is nice to meet you, leader from another world," said Sayama as he held out his right hand.

"Ahh," groaned Fasolt as he held out his right hand which was covered by a large work glove. But his outstretched hand was clenched in a fist. "We do it like this in 1st-Gear, Sayama Mikoto. According to folklorists, the purpose is to show you are not holding a weapon, but a lot of us would injure each other if we held hands."

It was true that Fasolt's hand had claws sticking out from the work glove. The ends were round, but those ends were white from being filed down. Sayama decided to clench his right hand into a fist as well.

Fasolt struck Sayama's fist with his own. Sayama did the same in return.

"Excellent. Do not forget to use your palm instead when greeting a woman. If you want to remember how to greet people in 1st-Gear, just remember to punch the men and stroke the women. That saying comes from the city's 14th block and I used to follow it quite a lot."

Fasolt's words arrived all at once, but they were easy to listen to.

It has a nice rhythm, analyzed Sayama.

Ooshiro said, "In 1st-Gear, writing produces power, so they never advanced very far when it came to keeping documents and records. The dragon race has a long life, a large lung capacity, and an excellent memory, so they were often record keepers, judges, and historical storytellers."

"Yes. I gave up the position of judge due to my age, but I will continue as storyteller until I die. Not many speak like this anymore, but I suppose that is just the age we live in. Oh, but I am a bit disappointed that you do not seem very surprised to see me, Sayama Mikoto. Shinjou there was quite surprised when she first saw me. "

"I-I was just a kid. I didn't really understand."

Shinjou lowered her head and blushed while Ooshiro folded his arms and spoke.

"When she first met Fasolt, she climbed up on his back and was surprised not to see a zipper."

"B-but I was watching Aretorman Cement and there was one on his back."

"Why were you watching a minor Showa tokusatsu show? Do television broadcasts arrive in Okutama with a time lag?"

Fasolt laughed from the throat and closed his eyes nostalgically.

"It was even more amazing when Ooshiro met me the first time as a child. He wet himself as soon as he saw me and was so surprised he let out some strange shriek and ran up to attack me. I knocked him to the ground without even thinking. It is a complete mystery how that never affected the negotiations afterwards."

"Hitting someone who deserves to be hit does not affect the negotiations."

"I see, I see. I thank you for solving that 50-year-old mystery, Sayama Mikoto."

Sayama and Fasolt lightly tapped their fists together. The half-dragon ignored Ooshiro who seemed to want to say something.

"Now then. If you like, we can begin the provisional negotiations. Public matters should be done in a public place, so our custom is to do this in the public square."

Sayama nodded, but then said, "If possible, could you perform your job as storyteller first?"

Fasolt and Ooshiro looked over at him, but Shinjou nodded.

"That's right. Shinjou-kun and I don't know much about 1st-Gear."

"You are quite different from Ooshiro despite being the same race. I am a bit moved. Tes."

After giving his consent, Fasolt turned his back and began walking.

Ooshiro began to follow Fasolt, but first looked over at Sayama and turned his thumb downwards.

"You had better remember this."

"Is that any way for an adult to act?" replied Sayama.

Ooshiro ran after Fasolt while blatantly pretending to cry.

Sayama exchanged a glance with Shinjou and sighed. With a bitter smile, he jogged after Fasolt.

As he did, Sayama looked at Fasolt's back. His low shoulders stuck out from the collar of his clothes. On either side was a portion not covered by the shell or scales. That area was as long and thick as an arm and the skin was dark red and hardened like a burn scar.

Shinjou whispered to Sayama from where she walked alongside him.

"Those are the scars from cutting off his own wings. Or so I've heard."

Whether he heard her or not, Fasolt spoke as he looked across the earthen public square that existed between the trees and houses and a wheat field.

"On a sunny day, the air, the wind, and stories of the past will all flow far and wide. Before we begin the negotiations, I will tell you the history of our land."

Instead of just taking a breath, Fasolt seemed to store up even more breaths before speaking once more.

"As well as its destruction."

Brunhild was dreaming. 1st-Gear's destruction was recreated in her dream.

In the darkness of the night, their small cabin shook. The ground shook as if it was being struck.

Brunhild ran through the cabin. She held the birdcage in her arms and called out the names of those she trusted as she went from room to room.

In the distance, she heard the earth trembling as if she could feel it in her gut. From nearby, a vibration shook her bones.

As she heard these noises, she cried out while shedding tears. And she ran once more through the rooms she had looked through so many times already.

The fireplace in the central room had crumbled and the stone inside had burned and scattered.

The six-row keyboard against the wall of the back room had been broken by a fallen joist.

The wall and ceiling of the tilted room were decorated with rolled cloth written with the words for good luck. They were for the festival.

"Why is this happening on the day of the festival…?"

The trembling of the earth grew stronger and she tripped. The cage struck the ground and she almost fell on top of it.

That was when an arm reached out and supported her from behind.

She picked up the cage and turned around to find a red-haired woman.

"Miss Gutrune…"

"Yes," nodded Gutrune.

She tried to embrace Brunhild, but her eyes stopped on the birdcage. In that shaking cabin, she smiled and kissed Brunhild on the cheek.

"Listen, Nein. I have to go to the royal palace. I can only think something has happened to the Concept Core there."

"…Eh?"

Brunhild, who had been called Nein, was confused, but the ground shook once more and the roof groaned.

Gutrune looked up and said, "The weapons laboratory is likely closer. If it comes to it, the gate will be opened, so wait there. The doctor and Lord Hagen are in the laboratory. They will give you a snack to eat, okay?"

"No, I want to be with everyone. Where are the doctor and the others? Are they not here?"

Gutrune fell silent, but Brunhild continued to ask questions.

"The book on Gram was missing from the back room. So was the book on Fafnir. …Where is Siegfried? Did he betray us? Hey, did he betray us!?"

Gutrune took the questions head on. She closed her eyes and opened her mouth to speak.

"…"

And she closed it once more.

She took a breath and opened her eyes. She stared directly at Brunhild.

"He…might have. But he might not have."

Brunhild realized her expression had brightened somewhat when she heard those words. She knew that Gutrune trusted him, too.

Gutrune pulled Brunhild toward her while lightly embracing her, birdcage and all.

"I will go check, so you run away ahead of me."

"C-can't you go with me at least?"

Gutrune gently let go and shook her head.

"I am a member of the royal family. The high officials have returned to their homes for the festival, so only the doctor and I can enter the basement. And something must be happening there. I must go."

"Why? Why do you have to go?"

"I am sure I will be able to save someone or something ." She gave a bitter smile. "My father has grown weak ever since my mother died. I should have saved him… but it seems I can do that now. Whatever happens and however this turns out, there is something I must do as a member of the royal family."

"What will you do if Siegfried betrayed us?"

"Do not worry. No matter what happens, I will persuade him. Together, we can preserve and save this world. …But as a member of the royal family, I may have to be forceful with him. If that happens, you take care of him."

"And…and once that happens, we can all be together again someday?"

"Of course. I will persuade him and you will support him. And…we will always be together."

"Do you promise?" asked Brunhild.

Gutrune smiled and replied, "Yes, I promise we will always be together."

She rubbed Brunhild's head. The gentle sensation calmed Brunhild and she finally smiled.

"You are a good girl, Nein," said Gutrune with a smile of her own.

The bird in the birdcage chirped amid the shaking and the sounds of trembling.

As Brunhild heard that chirping, she awoke from her dream.

When Brunhild opened her eyes, she saw the art room turned on its side.

She had fallen asleep with her head lying on the work table. Her face was pointed to the left. Her neck felt stiff as she straightened up.

She touched her cheek and felt the tile pattern of the work table's surface.

"This is not a good way to live."

She looked down to find the small bird had left its box and was looking up at her.

The contents of the food dish had clearly lessened. The bird seemed plenty hungry.

She held her hand out on a whim and the bird flapped its wings and flew up to her shoulder.

Brunhild laughed. Turning her head hurt a bit, but she endured. She looked the chirping bird in the eye. She could not say whether the tears in her eyes were from the dream, the pain in her neck, or the bird's recovery.

Brunhild looked down and searched for the black cat.

But it was not there.

She thought back and the scene just before she fell asleep appeared in the back of her mind.

She turned toward the door and found it was unlocked .

"I managed to send him off for the periodic report…"

She breathed a sigh of relief as the cat's owner. She turned away from the door and her gaze naturally focused on the center of the art room.

An unfinished painting stood on an easel there.

A single small cabin was visible in a forest of black and green. Brunhild spoke to the bird as she looked at the cabin which had been started with pale black.

"This is the world I came from." She gave a bitter laugh. "The final promise made to me there was never upheld. She never came back. I doubt she was able to persuade him. And…It seems he betrayed us and abandoned us. The only person left was me, the one who had trusted everyone else."

Brunhild looked at the bird.

"But," she began.

The bird chirped. It waved its tail up and down happily.

As she listened to that chirping, Brunhild sat in the chair in front of the easel. She lowered her head a bit.

"I shouldn't have asked him why he saved you," muttered Brunhild as she recalled the scene from her dream. "Why did she say that when she was going to the palace to be killed by him? Why would she ask me to take care of him or say that we would always be together ?"

There was no one who could answer that question. Instead, the bird stopped chirping and tilted its head.

In the center of the 1st-Gear reservation's public square, a few blue plates were flipped upside down on the ground. The bottom of those plates said "floor" and the top said "public square".

Sayama and the others sat on the plates below them as the "floor" while listening to Fasolt speak.

He gave a summary of the greatest reaches of time, beginning with the dragon god's creation of the land.

After he spoke for several minutes, his continuing words spoke of the creation of man and the formation of a kingdom.

"Was that the Wotan Kingdom?" asked Sayama and Fasolt nodded.

He continued his stories even as villagers passed by and as he greeted the winged people and members of the giant race.

Once Fasolt reached the leader of the kingdom from three generations back when a black dragon was captured when it came flying through the sky from one of the other worlds of the dragon god, the story ceased to be told secondhand.

Time continued to pass and, at one point, a single strange visitor arrived in their world.

"He was not a descendent of the dragon god and he came from a land that was meaningless to us. King Wotan had lost his wife, and when one of his mechanical dragons began rampaging, this visitor arrived and defeated it."

Fasolt took a breath. The sounds of continued breathing came from the back of his neck and his sides.

When he opened his mouth to speak again after about a minute, he spoke in the rhythm of conversation rather than the rhythm of storytelling.

"Regin joined with Fafnir to help the king protect the concepts, but Siegfried killed the both of them with the holy sword Gram and sent the concepts out of control to lead 1st-Gear to a closed annihilation. Most believe he also killed Princess Gutrune when she arrived. Siegfried himself has admitted it."

And…

"Most of 1st-Gear's residents still hold a grudge and they have continued to seek the destruction of Gram and Siegfried's assassination even after escaping to Low-Gear ."

"Why do they wish to destroy Gram? I thought that was your world's weapon."

"The holy sword Gram was created as a concept weapon with a will of its own, Sayama Mikoto. They view it as a crime for the sword to have agreed to take

Siegfried as its master. The militant groups of 1st-Gear wish to enact vengeance on Gram after acquiring 1st-Gear's Concept Core from it."

"I see," said Sayama. "So that is Siegfried's past."

"When he rescued the village, he was injured. The wise man Regin took him in. Venerable Regin had also taken in Princess Gutrune when the king distanced her after losing his wife and a girl named Nein of the long-lived race who was orphaned during the Concept War. At first, he intended to ask Siegfried for information on Low-Gear."

"There was no hostility between them?"

"I hear there were a few conflicts, but Siegfried and the princess got along well. Music…Yes, Siegfried was also skilled at music, so they had that in common. But," said Fasolt, "that ended on the day of the star festival. It happened while the royal palace was at its most empty because we had all returned to the lands we ruled over. There was a sudden earthquake and the sky split apart. The world never recovered."

"…Siegfried did that?"

"By that time, he had already left through the gate in the royal palace. We never met him again. As the princess wished, we brought her to the palace's viewing platform and let her deliver a speech. She told the people that 1st-Gear had lost and would be destroyed. She instructed them to escape to Low-Gear through either the gate in the royal palace or the gate in the city. If she had not done so, I doubt the chaos in the city would have ever died down, but she ran out of strength there…"

"…"

Fasolt closed his eyes and nodded when Sayama replied with nothing but silence.

"As the world was destroyed, we split between the eastern and western gates. The gate near the royal palace led here. The gate near the weapons laboratory most likely came out somewhere in Japan's Chugoku region. Our gates mostly opened into the European country of Germany, so that one would be the primary gate. And that is the story of 1st-Gear's destruction as I know it," concluded Fasolt.

Ooshiro sat cross-legged next to him while typing on the laptop sitting on his lap.

"It has continued to be difficult ever since then. The peaceful faction that escaped through the royal palace gate entered under UCAT's protection, but the radi-… militant faction refused our protection and is continuing to fight. And of those who escaped through the royal palace gate, another militant group called the Royal Palace faction split off with some concept space technology. But you saw what became of them yesterday. " Ooshiro nodded and formed a smile. "These provisional negotiations will include all of that. …At any rate, just take it easy."

Chapter 19: Prematurity of Thoughts

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“Prematurity of Thoughts”

What is the difference between being hasty and acting quickly?
The answer is incredibly simple
It is decided by whether the outcome is successful or not

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The preliminary negotiations with Fasolt began with a check of the initial assumptions.

"At the moment, there is no sign of the City faction joining us. The negotiations will primarily relate to the Royal Palace faction joining. These negotiations are the preliminary preparations for the Leviathan Road."

From there, Fasolt informed Sayama of a few matters:

UCAT had asked that Fasolt remains 1st-Gear's representative, UCAT special division security guards would be maintaining a presence in the reservation for a temporary period of time after the Royal Palace faction arrived, and due to cultural similarities, the reservation would prefer if those guards were sent in from German UCAT.

Sayama replied that he understood, Shinjou nodded, and Ooshiro typed it up on his keyboard to keep records.

Once the initial assumptions had been clarified, Fasolt said, “The day after tomorrow, 167 members of the Royal Palace faction will be arriving here. It is impossible for us to secure enough arable land for all of them.”

“Are you asking for an expansion to the concept space creating the reservation?”

Fasolt did not nod. Sayama turned to Ooshiro.

“What would happen if it was expanded?”

“It already covers a radius of one kilometer. If the radius was expanded by 100 meters, the area would increase by 21%. …It is a simple calculation, but you understand what it means to increase their yearly budget by 20%, right? We already put 10 digits worth of budget a year into maintaining this place.”

“I see.” Sayama turned back toward Fasolt and said, “ Just because the Royal Palace faction is joining you, I cannot approve merely expanding the reservation.”

"Why not?"

"You mentioned before that there is a process for naturalization. That means you try not to bring in anyone who can survive outside of 1st-Gear's concepts, correct?"

"Yes."

"That means we need to go over the list of those arriving and see how many belong to races that can be naturalized. We can build temporary lodging for those who can be naturalized, temporarily prioritize food distribution, and build houses for and expand the fields for those who will be ultimately staying. I think we can hold new negotiations over the land issue once you know how many will be staying." Sayama gave a bitter smile. "But I think you knew all this. That is why you said what you said: 'It is impossible for us to secure enough arable land for all of them.' And that is why you did not answer my question, isn't it?"

After a short silence, Fasolt laughed from deep in his throat.

"Yes. I did no more than tell the truth, Sayama Mikoto. You are the one that misinterpreted, boy."

Sayama smiled and Shinjou let out a sigh next to him.

Something is beginning, thought Sayama.

He quickly began to calculate out what he and his opponent had at their disposal.

Via UCAT, Sayama had the authority to do whatever he wanted with the concept space. However, if he used that authority, he would be distancing 1st-Gear's cooperation in the Leviathan Road.

On the other hand, his opponent had a past Sayama was unaware of and could make demands from the position of a victim. When he used the sudden arrival of the Royal Palace faction as a shield, Sayama had difficulty telling the truth of his demands because too much was unknown.

…At any rate, he will be making demands.

He would give some reason for making a demand no matter how ridiculous. If Sayama misjudged the situation and accepted it, his opponent would profit.

Possessing a kind heart would be a disadvantage here.

Sayama trusted his prediction that the negotiations had already begun.

He took a breath, pulled a handkerchief out of his breast pocket, and wiped his brow.

Fasolt watched Sayama.

In one hand, the boy was folding the handkerchief he had pulled from his breast pocket.

Fasolt looked up and found the sun was at its highest point.

"It really is hot," said Sayama as if informing Fasolt who was looking up into the sky.

"Yes, it is," agreed Fasolt before lowering his gaze.

He is very young, thought Fasolt about Sayama who was looking directly at him.

Fasolt thought back to the previous conversation. The boy had responded properly to his slight test and he had seen through Fasolt's intentions. Even the standard

UCAT negotiators could do the same. It was an issue of paying attention.

But this boy had intentionally pretended to be mistaken and had thought up an actual means of handling the situation, even if only a superficial one.

His solution had been incomplete, but it was the specialists' job to finish it off.

For a leader, what truly mattered was negotiating without making any mistakes and deciding on a general course of action.

Fasolt had yet to fully make up his mind about Sayama.

Sayama looked up toward the sun high in the sky and began to remove his coat.

He roughly gathered the sleeves, folded it so the front was visible, and handed it to Shinjou next to him.

As soon as he did, Shinjou's eyes opened wide and she whispered to Sayama.

"Wh-what are you saying? I c-can't do that…"

Shinjou looked over at Fasolt. She then frantically adjusted her position and held Sayama's coat.

With a slightly disappointed look, Sayama returned to his proper position. He wiped his brow with his handkerchief and placed it in the pocket on his shirt. The handkerchief stuck out from the shirt a bit.

Nevertheless, Sayama turned toward Fasolt.

Next to him, Shinjou continually glanced over at him, but Sayama did not seem to notice.

Fasolt then looked over at the coat Shinjou was holding. Its breast pocket was turned toward him.

Fasolt thought about the boy before his eyes. *He really is young*, he concluded before making his next move.

Sayama heard Fasolt speak.

"Our demands are quite simple, Sayama Mikoto. We want you to hand over Siegfried, the holy sword Gram,

and the Concept Core held within the sword. Until then, we will not give you the right to use 1st-Gear's Concept Core and we will not help persuade the City faction."

"What?"

Fasolt did not even acknowledge his question.

"After the Concept War, this reservation agreed to cooperate with UCAT, but we agreed to nothing concerning the Leviathan Road. That is why we demand that we begin anew here. Hand over the war criminal. If you promise that, the Royal Palace faction and the City faction will both fall in line with the peaceful faction. We will make sure they do."

"And you want us to hand over Gram and the Concept Core inside it?"

"I think it will be necessary to convince the City faction, but what do you think? Even if we persuade them to join with us, I doubt they will do what we say if we have not been granted some power."

Sayama remained silent. Fasolt watched him as he sat silently.

"Just to be clear, threatening to remove this concept space to aid your negotiations will gain you nothing."

Sayama did not say he would not do so. If he had to, he would. Fasolt had warned it would gain him nothing, but those were nothing but words. It was impossible to know what would happen if he actually did it.

However, that was a last resort. Using it would end the relationship between them.

Sayama took a breath.

"Could you stop testing me? Unnecessary statements could hinder our negotiations," he said.

"Saying many things in quick succession is the special characteristic of a storyteller."

The dragon gave no apology. That gave Sayama an odd sense of relief.

His opponent was a proud person. That may have been a common characteristic of 1st-Gear. No matter how far they lowered themselves and no matter what means they chose to use, they would always give precedence to their self-respect.

…They are obstinate and direct.

They were easy to handle as allies, but impossible to avoid as an enemy.

With that in mind, Sayama once more pulled the handkerchief from his breast pocket.

He wiped his brow and Shinjou's shoulders jumped slightly next to him.

At the same time, Fasolt looked over at Shinjou.

"There is nothing to be afraid of. As Ooshiro said, you can take it easy."

"Oh, right," said Shinjou as she slightly relaxed her legs which had been strictly kept in the seiza position.

As soon as she did, Fasolt's hand moved.

"Ah," gasped Shinjou, but Fasolt had already snatched the coat from her lap.

"This is a nice coat. Do you mind if I take a look at it?"

As Fasolt asked his question, an object fell from the suit coat in his hand.

Sayama clearly saw the cell phone drop. It was able to record audio.

“Whoops,” said Fasolt as he grabbed it in midair.

And with a clear noise, he crushed the cell phone in his hand.

“Oh, my mistake. I give you my personal apology. However.” Fasolt returned the suit coat to Shinjou and held up the remains of the cell phone in his other hand. “ This was not running by any chance, was it? You were not so concerned about me that you felt the need to give a sign to have me filmed from the side, were you?”

Fasolt saw Sayama’s expression change twice in response to his words. It changed from tense to harsh and then from harsh to joyful. Fasolt’s thoughts raced as he saw those changes.

…Did he notice my trick?

When Fasolt had watched over the autopsy of the werewolf that had committed suicide the day before yesterday, he had inspected Sayama's possessions. And knowing that Sayama would be his opponent in the negotiations, he had thought up a certain trick.

He had switched on the digital recorder to drain the battery and had left the cell phone untouched. If Sayama brought the two items to the negotiations, he would need to use the cell phone to record any proof of what was said.

However, the cell phone's microphone was weak, so it and the built-in camera would have to be on the surface.

Locating Sayama's hiding spot for it had not been difficult. The camera had been sticking a bit out of his coat pocket.

Fasolt was certain the boy had been recording him. He had seen the small exchange between Sayama and Shinjou and he had seen Shinjou's movements.

Such awkward teamwork, thought Fasolt.

That was why he had grabbed the coat and smashed the cell phone.

Sayama's use of the cell phone was proof that he had viewed the negotiations as dangerous and had wanted to secretly leave some proof behind. Taking that from him and destroying it while also warning him would inflict inescapable pressure on the boy.

Sayama was currently looking at the smashed cell phone.

"I do not believe I had it running," he said with his head down as if trying to recall.

Liar, thought Fasolt with a bitter smile in his heart.

As Fasolt watched, Sayama turned to Ooshiro to his left.

"Not that it matters. The old man here will handle recording what is said."

Fasolt followed Sayama's gaze and watched Ooshiro typing.

He nodded and said, “Unfortunately, Ooshiro’s records will not pass as proof.”

“Wh-why not?” asked Shinjou as she held the coat.

Fasolt nodded and replied, “That data can be easily altered. That is why I want to resolve these negotiations right here like this.”

Fasolt pulled a sheet of canvas from the inside pocket of his vest.

It was covered with the writing of 1st-Gear. Sayama would be able to read it because an image of the meaning took priority here.

It was a contract saying UCAT would accept the reservation’s demands. Below the agreement was a five centimeter underline.

Once he saw Sayama’s gaze stop on the underline, Fasolt spoke in a tone that held a slight smile.

“You will stamp your seal there. …You have your seal with you, don’t you? It is with the digital recorder with the dead battery.”

Shinjou embraced Sayama's coat. She squeezed it between her arms.

And she glanced over at Sayama next to her.

What will he do now? she wondered. *Is there anything he can do?*

As she watched on, Sayama stared expressionlessly at the contract.

He then suddenly moved. He pulled his handkerchief from his breast pocket with his right hand and lightly shook his wrist.

He looked at Fasolt and said, "So you saw through it. Yes, the battery is indeed dead. In that case, I no longer need it."

He produced a digital recorder from the handkerchief. The power light was off which indicated it was not running. However, he was not looking at the recorder. He was looking at the broken cell phone that had fallen to the ground.

"I was planning to record any promises you made to perhaps later change our demands."

Sayama sighed and took his seal case out of his pocket using his free left hand.

He placed the digital recorder and handkerchief next to him and placed the seal before him.

"But I am not yet ready to stamp my seal," he said.

"Are you saying you will eventually do so?"

Sayama gave no response.

He remained silent and his face held no expression.

Faced with this, Fasolt froze in place.

Shinjou gulped lightly at seeing this silence and expressionlessness from Sayama for the first time. However…

"…"

His pulse was calm.

Why is that? she wondered.

She felt as if she had seen him like this before.

When had it been?

She searched through her memories and arrived at a certain moment in the past.

The night before last, when he had stood before her and beyond the werewolf.

What happened after that moment? she thought.

She thought back. In that moment, Sayama had stepped forward and spoken to their enemy. He had provoked the enemy. And now…

"You should learn that those who trust in writing can be betrayed by writing." Sayama lightly raised his right hand. "Let me be clear up front: I cannot agree to any one of the demands you have given."

"Then what will you say when you see this?"

Fasolt pulled a thick book from his vest and held it so Shinjou and the others could see.

It was a hardcover book made of canvas sheets and cloth. Shinjou had seen it before.

"That's the book the knight had yesterday."

"Yes. It is an investigation report on the destruction of our Wotan Kingdom. Volunteers from the Royal Palace faction visited both the peaceful faction and the City Faction to gather the records to create it. These records could only have been made by the Royal palace faction that sat in the middle. Neither we nor the City faction could have made it."

Sayama took the investigation report and opened it.

Shinjou peered at its contents from the side. It listed a calculation of the total amount of destruction while using spelling that avoided any dangerous terminology. Each time Sayama turned the page, Shinjou could sense the image of the destruction detailed within.

Arton Central Street was smashed along with the decorations for the festival in the small park: 38 dead.

Ethos District 3 contained a wooden school, but it was crushed along with the people who had taken refuge inside: 91 dead.

The evacuation warning never reached the 3rd redevelopment sector and the pioneer village was eliminated without knowing what was happening: 46 dead.

In addition, there was damage to houses in several sectors or out in nature, the loss of assets and livestock, and a calculated value of the land lost. It was all calculated out to reach a final sum for the damages.

"Once converted to the currency of philosopher's stones, UCAT must maintain this reservation for 7022 years. We have lived here for 60 years, so that still leaves 6962 years. Exchanging that debt for one man and a sword sounds like a bargain to me."

That's absurd, thought Shinjou with a gulp.

She slowly looked over at Sayama so Fasolt would not notice her internal panic. She found Sayama as expressionless and silent as before.

What will he do now? she thought.

And she had another thought.

She recalled what Fasolt had said when he had destroyed the cell phone:

You felt the need to give a sign to have me filmed from the side.

She did not know what he had meant by that. She had not been given that role.

But even if she did not understand, Shinjou knew that everything was advancing. And she knew that Sayama likely had some plan.

Sayama looked at Fasolt.

Fasolt had been looking at him for a while now. With that in mind, he spoke.

"Giving concrete value to people's lives is something else I am not willing to do."

"If doing so is necessary for a negotiation, we will choose that as our weapon."

"And so you are demanding a human life in the place of money?"

"Demanding? No. My role here is to present you with possibilities. Your role here is to choose, Sayama Mikoto. I have presented you with a means of paying reparations for the damages. You are the one that chooses whether you will pay for your ancestors' mistakes with seven thousand years of expenses or by handing over that man and Gram."

"And if I handed them over, I would be putting a price on a human life?"

"Yes, if you did. We would have prepared a different path, but you would have chosen that path because you could not pay. It would not hurt us in any way."

Sayama thought. According to Ooshiro, it was impossible to even increase the reservation's yearly maintenance expenses by 20%. That meant it was beyond impossible to pay off the seven thousand years' worth of debt right away. And that was why he asked the next question.

"Are Siegfried and Gram really that valuable?"

"They are."

"I see." Sayama picked up the contract and the seal case in front of them. "Shinjou-kun, hand me a pen from my coat's breast pocket."

"Oh, right."

Shinjou took a silver ballpoint pen from the pocket and handed it over.

Sayama flipped over the contract and wrote something while using the cover of the investigation report as a desk. He stamped what he wrote with the seal he took from the case and then placed the contract in front of Fasolt.

"If you want something of such great value, then how about we resolve everything like this?"

Everyone looked at the back of the contract.

Shinjou gulped, Fasolt clenched his hands, and Ooshiro smiled bitterly.

Sayama read what he had written on the back of the contract.

"Seven thousand years shall be added to the current seven thousand year debt. In exchange, we shall buy the half-dragon Fasolt and all of his rights. …That should be fine with anyone who will give monetary value to people 's lives."

"You will buy your negotiating opponent!?" cried Fasolt.

A wind blew through and disturbed Sayama's hair, but he ignored it and spoke.

"If doing so is necessary for a negotiation, we will choose that as our weapon. Those are your words. And I believe we had agreed to that view. …You asked me to sell someone's life if I could not pay." He gave a bitter smile. "But that also means I can buy someone's life if I can pay."

"…"

"We will pay what is needed. It does not matter how many years it takes, who might suffer, or even if you refuse us. So let me say this: you may think you all have pride, but you only have the spirit of poor slaves."

"Slaves? Now you've said it, you aboriginal."

"Aboriginal? We certainly have evolved. I miss the days when we were called yellow monkeys." Sayama's bitter smile deepened. "Fasolt, let me tell what kind of race we are. We are the Japanese, the 'economic animals'. We have nothing to fear when it comes to money. A debt ? We just need to save up. The government? It runs on money. A grudge? That is just a bias of the poor. Now, Fasolt, for fourteen thousand years of peace for your comrades, you will be ours. And let me say this: you will physically remain with 1st-Gear, but as our possession," he nodded, "you will withdraw all of your demands. No need to lower your head. You are our comrade now that we bought you. We have the right to do this. You are the one that brought up buying people's lives, something we had never done before."

At that point, Sayama threw the investigation report to the ground.

"This is absurd, Fasolt." He took a breath. "What is this investigation report? It may have some truth to it, but how much of it is truth? If you are going to carry out an investigation, have a third party do so or at least do so while we are present. Otherwise, this is nothing more than reference material. …Is presenting unreliable material at the negotiating table the 1st-Gear's way of doing things!?"

Fasolt responded to the last part more than anything else.

The creaking of his fangs could be heard from his clenched mouth.

But that was as much of Fasolt's power as was seen.

He slowly reached out a hand and picked the book up from the ground. He let out a long sigh.

"It is true this contains a fair bit of personal opinion for an investigation report. But are you really going to use the lack of records from this conversation to say such abusive things?"

Sayama turned a smile in Fasolt's direction.

"Abusive? That was a rebuke over how useless your investigation report is. …I was trying to say that your actions were showing contempt for the value of 1st-Gear. If you misinterpreted me, I apologize."

"No need." Fasolt drew back and held the book to his chest. He spoke once more after suppressing the anger in his voice. "Either way, we will not give you the right to use the Concept Core unless you accept our demands. … How do you intend to gain that right from me?"

Sayama glanced around. The nearby houses had their windows open because it was a sunny day, so he could see inside. Inside the shadowy houses, he could tell the items within were a bit different from those he was used to. Every house had bare walls and they grew flowers.

Sayama was searching for *a certain object* within those houses.

But from what he could see at a distance, it was not there. It was a completely normal object in his world, but it was absent here.

…It could be easily brought in from outside, but there is none here.

The possible reasons for this were simple. It may never have existed in 1st-Gear and was not needed, or UCAT feared letting 1st-Gear have it and so refused to do so.

It was one of those or possibly both.

Once he realized that, another fact came to Sayama. He realized the true purpose behind the negotiation.

"…"

He silently relaxed. He cooled his head that had begun to grow serious.

If I am right about the true purpose of this negotiation, thought Sayama, *trying to crush Fasolt would not be the best strategy.*

And that was why Sayama said what he did next. He breathed out, breathed in, and then spoke in a calm voice .

"Instead of Siegfried and the holy sword Gram, we will provide you with technology equivalent to seven thousand years' worth of budget or allow you to use said technology."

"Technology equivalent to seven thousand years' worth of budget?" asked Fasolt before laughing from the throat. "What do you mean by that? We already sustain ourselves. Is there any technology we could possibly want and is there any technology Low-Gear could possibly provide us with?"

"There is."

"And what is it?'

Sayama thought and said, "It can be used as a weapon. It can be used as culture and civilization. It can be power and it can become anything in existence."

"Hah! How amusing! We in 1st-Gear live with the power of writing, so what more culture and civilization do we need!? And with our mechanical dragons, why would we need weapons?" Fasolt strongly held the hardcover book against his chest. "Tell me, Sayama Mikoto. What is this technology you think we would exchange our Concept Core for? What is this technology that UCAT has been keeping from us?"

Sayama nodded and spoke a single word.

"Paper."

Fasolt almost dropped the book he was holding to his chest.

"Why would you think we need-…?"

"All of your writing is on parchment or canvas. And I do not see any bookshelves in these 1st-Gear houses. Paper is a necessary item to bring a society past a certain point, but it is being restricted here in some way. That is why I thought I could use the removal of that restriction as a bargaining chip."

Fasolt understood what Sayama meant.

In 1st-Gear, writing held power, so spelling something out held the possibility of danger. Needless to say, creating that writing in the proper form to create power was difficult and it was nothing but scribbles if done wrong.

However, nothing was as frightening as an unlikely accident.

That was why a storyteller like Fasolt passed down writing in the form of sound and most records were kept using symbols that were difficult to call writing. The writing in the investigation report had been carefully chosen so it would provide the proper images yet not have actual power.

Due to the conditions of their world, writing technology had not advanced. Most of the tools that could easily write had been in the control of the royal family and very few were produced.

As a storyteller, he knew very well that 1st-Gear's culture was built around that.

But he had to wonder what would happen if that assumption was removed.

The boy before him spoke.

"What if you used the safe writing used in that investigation report as the foundation for a carefully selected set of everyday writing with little power? Wouldn't that allow you to pass down your current culture and allow anyone to perform research?"

He was saying the current state of 1st-Gear's culture would change.

Sayama held a hand out toward him. He reached for the book at his chest.

Fasolt handed the boy the hardcover book as he wanted.

Sayama took it and flipped through the pages.

"You had so many houses. And the people living in them worked at the schools, stores, and government offices. But out of fear of dangerous writing, you could not record any of it. You never expanded the writing technology that would support those records and UCAT is currently keeping our technology from you."

"That is true…"

"UCAT will remove the restrictions on that technology as a form of reparations," said Sayama.

Fasolt turned to Ooshiro who looked back at him.

"Well, we would need to negotiate it out with the UCATs from other countries. What a pain," said the old man.

Fasolt gave a quiet laugh from the throat and listened as Sayama continued to speak.

"Our world is immature, Fasolt. About a thousand years ago, we believed our world had the same table shape as your world. But our people walked, left records, and changed our beliefs to match the truth. And even now we are building up more and more records to divide truth from falsehood."

"And you are telling us to do the same? I see," said Fasolt with a nod.

It was a nice idea. If they had writing tools that could be mass produced, they would only need people with the ability to write in the proper way. And instead of restricting usage of the writing tools as the royal family had done, they would restrict the words that held power and spread the safe words.

Knowledge would spread and they would even be able to interact with other cultures. However…

"Sayama Mikoto. That is a nice idea, but a problem remains. And our negotiations must continue."

"Eh?" said Shinjou as Fasolt turned back toward Sayama.

Sayama showed no panic or surprise over his words.

He only said, "Yes, you understand, don't you? Writing can betray those who use it. Building up and spreading records can do more than create; it can also destroy." Sayama held up the hardcover book. "If you obtain the technology to publish books, you will have books like this one. And that will pass your grudges down to the later generations. The power we give you will create more enemies for us."

"And that is why I must ask you something, boy… No, you are no boy. You are merely Sayama Mikoto. Can you give us this technology without fearing the spread of our grudges, protect Siegfried and the holy sword Gram, and also acquire the Concept Core?"

"Of course," replied Sayama.

Shinjou's eyes opened wide when she heard what Sayama said.

"Y-you can't, Sayama-kun! You can't make an enemy of him!"

"I think it will be fine. Fasolt understands that this investigation report is nothing more than reference material. After I rebuked him, he admitted that it includes personal opinion."

"He did, but…"

Fasolt nodded.

"Those comments and the records of them are worth nothing. At the negotiating table, only the final decision matters."

Ooshiro looked up and said, "Um, you do know I am working really hard typing up everything you say, right? Please do not say it is worth nothing."

Fasolt ignored him. The half-dragon looked down at the remains of the cell phone lying between Sayama and himself.

"My comment admitting the investigation report contains personal opinion will not remain in the records. That means I can insist on its legitimacy. No matter what you say, it will be seen as accurate. Even if you protest, it will be published and distributed to everyone. A large number of people will believe it over you!"

"Fasolt, I am about to test how much you have been paying attention. Is that okay?"

Sayama's sudden words caused Fasolt to look up.

"What?"

"I will be asking some questions and you will answer me. Got it? When you destroyed the cell phone whose remains lie before me, did you check to see if it was running?"

Shinjou did not understand the point of the question.

And Fasolt did not seem to either.

He sank down slightly and asked, "Are you saying…it was not running?"

Those words which were inarticulate for a half-dragon caused Shinjou to tilt her head in confusion.

“What do you mean?” she asked and Fasolt quickly turned toward her.

“Why are you asking?”

“Oh, um, it’s nothing. Nothing at all. There might have been a slight misunderstanding.

She frantically waved her hands in front of her, but Fasolt kept his gaze on her. He opened his fang-filled mouth and spoke.

“What is going on? Shinjou, I thought you and Sayama were working together. He would give you a sign and you would record what I-…”

“W-wait a second!”

Shinjou did not understand some of what he had said. And it reminded her of another baffling thing Fasolt had said earlier. Shinjou asked about the confusing parts.

"What do you mean we were working together? And what sign?"

Fasolt had been leaning forward, but he straightened up in an instant.

While still looking at Shinjou, he bared his teeth and trembled.

"Sayama Mikoto handed you the cell phone along with his coat. When he raised his handkerchief as a sign, you began recording, did you not? He wanted you to record my abusive remarks."

"Eh? N-no. I wasn't given that role."

He was mistaken about something. For some reason, that half-dragon was focused on her even though she had been doing nothing but listen.

Fasolt continued to speak to provide his evidence.

"Then why did you squirm a bit whenever Sayama Mikoto pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his brow?

He provided you with instructions when he handed you his coat, correct? I heard you say you could not do something."

Shinjou gasped.

"N-no!"

She looked to the side and found Sayama staring expressionlessly up into the sky. He must have noticed her looking at him because he picked Baku up from his left shoulder and placed him on his head.

He and the beast squinted as they looked up into the sky.

He was determined to ignore her.

That left her with no choice. While prepared to blush, Shinjou proved her innocence to Fasolt.

"I-I will tell you what Sayama-kun told me to do when handing me his coat!" She hesitated for a moment. " 'I am so nervous that I really want to feel up your butt. If I am unable to resist any longer, I will give you a sign by raising my handkerchief. When I do, stick your butt out for me'! But I can't do that. B-but it was a request from

Sayama-kun, so I-I would jump in shock a bit whenever he pulled out his handkerchief!”

As she blushed and gave her explanation, Fasolt’s mouth hung limply open.

He slowly faced forward while his open mouth continued to produce no sound.

He stared at Sayama who still had Baku sitting on his head.

In response to everyone’s gazes, Sayama picked up what was lying next to him and held it up.

It was the digital recorder wrapped in his handkerchief. Its red power light was lit.

Sayama nodded and looked at Shinjou. He then spoke quietly for his own curiosity.

“Now, please continue, Shinjou-kun. What happened after you jumped in shock?”

“Why is that running!? Wasn’t its battery dead!?”

"Could you remain quiet, Fasolt? That will make it more difficult to edit later."

"Th-the difficulty doesn't matter! Explain what is going on!" demanded Shinjou.

Sayama picked up a part from the remains of the cell phone.

It was a battery that had been badly bent.

"You want to know why it is running? If you cannot answer a question this easy, I look forward to the difficulty you will face once you have paper, Fasolt. The answer is simple. I switched out the cell phone's battery before entering this concept space. Most modern handheld devices use a standard battery type whether they are IAI-made or not. You should remember that." He nodded and asked, "Fasolt, you were outside this place just before we entered the concept space, weren't you? You used your limited time outside to observe me. Isn't that right?"

"How do you know that?"

"The forest was too quiet. When a human is lurking in the forest, the birds and beasts grow cautious, but it was

even more silent than that. In other words, there was something greater than a human there. Also, you had come from the field, but your jika-tabi had moss on them. That proves you had run through the forest. When you noticed me looking at it, you frantically kicked it off." Sayama showed Fasolt the digital recorder. "When I noticed this recorder's battery was dead, I realized someone had tried something. Once I knew my opponent had tried to eliminate my use of this device, I merely had to use that to my advantage. Once I received them from Shinjou-kun, I switched out the batteries and decided to use the cell phone as a decoy."

"Then, Sayama-kun, this entire negotiation…"

"Has been recorded, yes. But it is missing the one thing I said while taking it out and placing it next to me. I had to turn it off to make it look like its battery was dead. "

Fasolt gulped and recalled what Sayama had said back then.

"You said the recorder's battery was dead and that you intended to record any promises I made with the cell phone… Was it all to put me at ease so I would bring out greater demands!?"

"Now, now. Please stop discussing comments you have no proof were ever spoken," said Sayama. "Or should I play back what I have recorded? I have you calling us aboriginals in response to my rebuke."

"No, more importantly…what do you want?"

Sayama shook his head in response.

"I want nothing. But let us do what is natural. I will approve providing you with our technology if you allow us use of the Concept Core. And you may carry out an investigation of 1st-Gear's destruction if it is done in cooperation with UCAT. For mutual understanding and reconciliation, we must have records if you are to have them. And once that is complete, we can begin thinking about what to do afterwards. …Am I wrong?"

In lieu of a response, Fasolt raised both of his hands.

Sayama sighed.

So it is over, he thought.

He lowered Baku from his head and muttered a short statement.

"What a farce."

Sayama's annoyed statement caused Shinjou to tilt her head. She could see he was frowning.

"A farce? Why? You look displeased."

Sayama nodded, looked in her direction, and then turned toward Ooshiro.

"Old man, please do not make me do this again."

Ooshiro looked up and gave a bitter smile. Shinjou could make no sense of the exchange.

"Wh-what do you mean? What did Ooshiro-san do?"

"I realized it partway through. The old man set all this up. Think about it. How was Fasolt able to touch my possessions? And who asked you to return them to me?

How was Fasolt able to wait for us outside the concept space during his limited time outside of it? And who was it that stopped us in front of him and asked if I was carrying anything?" He took a breath. "Simply put, these preliminary negotiations were a test. I realized it once I noticed the paper technology issue. 1st-Gear is obedient enough to go along with Low-Gear's restrictions. In that case, it was odd for Fasolt to be on the attack. I am ashamed I did not realize why and grew so worked up over a prank."

Sayama folded his arms and closed his eyes. Shinjou was unsure what to say to him.

Fasolt laughed from deep in his throat.

"Do not feel too bad, Sayama Mikoto. You may not believe me, but I was serious."

"Serious, hm?"

Sayama sighed with his eyes still closed.

His shoulders drooped and he seemed to have his own thoughts on the matter.

…Does he think Fasolt went easy on him?

"O-Ooshiro-san. Was today's negotiation effective?"

"Yes, removing the restriction on paper manufacturing is indeed a useful idea. I believe this was effective."

"Take this seriously. Sayama-kun wasn't arguing for fun."

Hearing that, Sayama opened his eyes. Shinjou looked him in the eye and thought.

…He can manage something in any situation.

"You are like the evil king of sophistry."

"Thank you for the blunt opinion," said Sayama with a bitter smile.

But Shinjou looked at him once more. When faced with an opponent making an absurd argument, this boy had refused to negotiate properly and had replied with an absurd argument of his own.

…The surname Sayama indicates a villain. Is that it?

She recalled that Sayama had said he possessed the abilities needed to carry out evil.

Is this what he meant? thought Shinjou.

She wondered what she would have done had she been in his place.

…If I had come back with a proper argument, I might have only been faced with another absurd argument.

But the truth of that could not be known. And it was a fact that Sayama's absurd argument had caused Fasolt to give in.

The only other information she had was Sayama's expression and the drooping of his shoulders.

…He did not get serious. That is probably because he realized partway through what Ooshiro-san had done.

She nodded and decided she would willingly play the role of listener if he wanted to complain about anything.

Doing so would surely be valuable for what had ended here today.

And just as Shinjou made up her mind, Fasolt turned to Sayama and spoke.

"This really did not go as I planned. Perhaps I should have expected that with Sayama's grandson."

Shinjou saw Sayama hold the left side of his chest. He frowned and looked up at Fasolt.

"You knew my grandfather?"

"I did, even if it was only for a short time. When we first arrived in this world, he was the member of UCAT that prepared the location which became this reservation. Siegfried had given him the holy sword Gram, so he extracted the concepts needed to create this place. I have not seen him since those initial negotiations, though."

"I see. Then I suppose you would know nothing of my father. He worked for IAI."

"We do not leave this place, so we know nothing of that. However, I do remember your grandfather quite well," said Fasolt. "Sixty years ago, we exchanged arguments very similar to these provisional negotiations. He too shouted angrily at me when I requested reparations equal to the number of the dead. He told me not to calculate the number and value of the dead and to instead live peacefully here and put together a plan to

restore our lost pride, even if there was an opposing faction. We have yet to do that, though."

Shinjou suddenly turned to Ooshiro who sat next to Fasolt. Ooshiro glanced toward Fasolt's back.

On that back that she had once clung to were the scars from the severed wings.

Oh, realized Shinjou in her heart. *So that's it.*

A short silence followed. Whatever Fasolt may have thought of that silence, he slowly turned toward Ooshiro who was looking up at him. While glancing over at the old man, he spoke in a critical tone.

"This is more your problem than mine, but UCAT is filled with too many mysteries."

"It is an organization that has hidden itself in the world so that it may save that world. Of course it has a lot of mysteries."

"So not even 1st-Gear's representative knows the details," commented Sayama.

Fasolt nodded and said, “We know almost nothing about UCAT’s activities. The one thing everyone knows is that a large scale change occurred in 1995. Japanese UCAT was temporarily dissolved and reorganized.”

Shinjou and Sayama both spoke in unison.

“Temporarily dissolved and reorganized?”

Sayama saw Fasolt look at Shinjou and himself.

“So you do not know about that. It happened suddenly at the end of ’95 which was almost the exact same time Shinjou was taken in by UCAT. All of the personnel other than the leaders left the organization.”

“Why?”

“I do not know, Sayama Mikoto. I would love to be told. I would assume only Ooshiro here and a few others know the truth behind it. One theory is that they were taking responsibility for the many deaths during relief operations after the Great Kansai Earthquake.”

"I see," said Sayama with a nod.

He was not discouraged.

The Leviathan Road had come with several conditions added by his grandfather. One of those was that they had to gather all of their information themselves.

Here, he only needed to learn about 1st-Gear. And…

…This just means I need to investigate UCAT in addition to the ten Gears.

Sayama nodded and Fasolt nodded in return. The half-dragon then turned to Shinjou and opened his mouth to speak.

"I have gone back and forth on whether I should tell you this, but I will tell you now since you have returned after so long."

"Eh? Me?" she asked.

"Yes. It will be an old story for you two. This concept space was constructed by Sayama Kaoru, but he said he was only able to do so by basing it on some data he had been given."

"From another UCAT member?"

"No, he said it was from another member of the former National Defense Department. While investigating for the National Defense Department, this person had managed to estimate what concepts the different Gears used. Sayama Kaoru said he had only followed the data from back then."

Fasolt looked up into the sky. His gaze moved slowly around as if he could see the invisible wall forming the concept space.

"This person originally became involved in the National Defense Department while working as the assistant of a Professor Kinugasa, but they never joined UCAT. I do not know what became of this person."

"Who was this person?" asked Sayama.

Fasolt spoke a single surname.

"Shinjou. That is all I was told."

Chapter 20: Heart of Realization

Chapter 20

“Heart of Realization”

Do you realize it because you know nothing?
Do you not realize it because you know everything?
There are some people who do neither

Do you realize it because you know nothing?

Do you not realize it because you know everything?

There are some people who do neither

Even though it was the beginning of the afternoon, the Kinugasa Library was dark.

The fluorescent lights on the ceiling were on, but that roof was high and the many bookshelves created shadows.

Three people could be seen within that slightly dark and pale library.

One was Siegfried who was speaking on the phone behind the counter.

One was Ooshiro Itaru who sat in a chair in the center of the stepped floor. His metal cane was leaning against the table.

The last was Sf who was observing a bookshelf in the back.

Ooshiro glanced over at the tall back standing behind the counter.

Siegfried had been on the phone for a while now and he showed no sign of finishing soon.

Itaru sank down a bit in his chair and crossed his legs. He shook the guest slipper around on the end of his sock.

“Itaru-sama.”

He turned toward that voice and found Sf standing expressionlessly with something in her hand.

“Oh, you found one of the blots on the record of my life.”

“Testament. It is your graduation album. But despite being called an album, it is a simple printed book.”

“Now here’s a surprise. A lecture on English from a German-made automaton. I thought that was your enemy’s language.”

"No, my true enemy is the Soviet Union. British and American ones have thin armor, so they are not a threat."

"…What in the world are you talking about?"

"Tes. I am talking about automatons. …What is that look in your eyes? This is common knowledge in the industry. Is there a problem?"

"According to my 'common knowledge', the Soviet Union was gone before you were created. Perhaps I am just imagining things."

"Tes. You are exactly right. However, the Soviet Union lives on in your heart, Itaru-sama."

"Oh? Another surprise. A doll is speaking about the human heart. And does that mean my heart is your enemy?"

"No, but I have determined it is Soviet-made. Its armor is thick and its attacks are guaranteed to kill, but it has little individuality. It is also worth mentioning that the armor is tilted diagonally. The mass-produced ones are different, though."

"You can also add that it is quite cold."

"I have no heart, so I cannot determine that for myself. "

Sf gave an expressionless bow. She held out the musty blue album.

Itaru silently took the velvet-covered album.

He opened it, flipped through the pages, and sighed as he looked through the class photos. Sf then spoke from behind him.

"I see a lot of faces that show there are no thoughts going through their heads."

"Don't steal my lines."

"It is my duty to save you whatever effort I can."

"What about the effort of throwing you away when you break?"

"Do not worry. I am set to cease functioning at the same time that you are destroyed. There will be no-…"

Itaru closed his eyes and cut Sf off.

"Don't say it. I've heard it so many times already," he said expressionlessly.

"Testament," replied Sf.

Sf fell silent and Itaru continued flipping through the album. He arrived at the graduation writings.

"Here it is. Read this ridiculous writing."

"Tes. Should I read it out loud?"

"Yes."

"Tes. You have not asked me to read you something in a long time. Not since five days after I arrived in Japan. I have checked my memory to a depth level of 5, so there is no mistaking it."

"Yes, I remember. As a prank, I handed you a pornographic manga I had confiscated from a worker, but you suddenly began reading it quite loudly. Are your ethical standards set to overseas levels?"

"You never told me to throw it away and reading writings to one's master is an important job of a maid or butler. However, my lack of emotion leaves me ill-suited

for a text with so much shouting and so many sound effects."

Itaru fell silent. He turned toward Sf with his eyes half-closed and held the album out toward her.

She took it and read, "Title: Stimulant."

"No, The one right below that one."

"Tes. Title: Untitled.

Just as we thought the long awaited time had come

A time came where we once more could only wait

We were taught nothing more than the accumulation of time

And new time was not what waited beyond our dreams

What we learned here was how to skillfully exploit time

And an understanding that nothingness is the time of salvation."

As Sf finished reading the writing, Itaru held his right hand against his face.

“That is so much better when read by someone who works for me. I love this feeling of my hair standing on end.”

“I have determined this was written by you, Itaru-sama.”

“Yes, it was. You could tell?”

“Tes. I could see an intentional effort to make each line 10 words long. Also, I can find nothing more than harassment in the meaning of the text.”

“Hah. You really are an excellent machine. I really mean that, so rejoice and express that joy in your actions. ”

“Tes.” Sf expressionlessly raised her arms above her hand and lowered them. “Did that satisfy your demand? If you wish for a more vigorous expression of joy, I can do it three times in a row.”

“The Germans really know how to make a high-performance machine.”

"Testament. Their support is excellent as well. Feel free to use me as you see fit."

Instead of nodding, Itaru gestured further into the library with his chin. Sf turned in that direction with the album in hand.

"…"

The light blue slipper on the end of Itaru's folded leg almost fell off, so she first put it back on properly.

She then walked off expressionlessly.

As she did, a small noise came from the counter behind her. It was the sound of a phone receiver being set down.

Itaru turned around and found Siegfried looking at him.

Itaru raised his sunglasses and said, "Men shouldn't spend so long on the phone."

"I had not spoken with this old comrade for 10 years. Now, Ooshiro Itaru, what do you need?"

"As Team Leviathan's supervisor, I came to check on a few things related to the transportation of the holy sword Gram. After all, Mr. Zonburg, you were the most closely involved in the destruction of 1st-Gear."

The white mechanical dragon Fafnir Custom slept in the base of 1st-Gear's City faction that existed underground below a gym.

Wind blew through the darkness.

The wind had color. That color was black. The black wind blew back and forth above Fafnir Custom's body as if dancing and then blew up toward the ceiling. A single small bell with writing carved into it hung there.

The wind struck the bell and the bell rang.

The bell emitted a high pitched noise and the wind suddenly formed a body.

It was a black cat. Specifically, the cat Brunhild owned.

"There we go."

The black cat twisted in midair and landed on Fafnir Custom's back. It pressed the inside of its legs against the slanted armor rather than trying to use its claws. It slowly lay down.

"Venerable Hagen," said the cat.

"I am here." A palely glowing old man appeared next to the black cat. He yawned and said, "Is this your periodic report?"

"Yes, it is. I have no news like yesterday, so I am just making an appearance."

"We have nothing new here either. You can go find something to eat outside until the sound of the bell fades away. Nein will not notice."

Hagen yawned again and the cat looked up at the side of the old man's face.

"Do you have dreams too, Venerable Hagen?"

"Ah?" Hagen looked down at the black cat and finally formed a smile. "Yes, I do. I was just dreaming of when Brunhild asked for help while crying."

"Was that when you joined with Fafnir Custom? … Why did you decide to do that as a member of the royal family?"

"I was the only one there with enough social status to lead everyone. And when we moved to this world, it was necessary to release the concepts inside it to create a concept space the people of 1st-Gear could live in. That meant someone had to join with Fafnir Custom." He placed his chin in his hands and let out a meaningless sigh. "I did something inexcusable to Brunhild…no, to Nein. How is she doing with Siegfried?"

The black cat remained silent. It looked away from Hagen and took three breaths before finally responding.

"Sh-she is observing him. …And she is keeping her distance to…yes, to make sure she is not found out."

"I see," said Hagen with a nod.

He had a smile on his face, but the ends of his eyebrows had lowered a small bit.

"I see," he muttered again. "Hey."

"Wh-what is it?" asked the black cat.

Hagen nodded once, looked forward, and then looked down.

"What we must do for our respective positions can be a lot of trouble. But…"

"But?"

"At the very least, I want you to remain her ally."

The black cat listened to what Hagen said and nodded in understanding within the dim darkness.

In the next moment, a knock came at the door to the room and a woman in a simple white outfit entered.

She was in a hurry. Her pace was quick as she entered and impatience could be heard in her voice.

"The investigation… The investigation is complete. It was exactly as you said, Lord Hagen." The woman took a breath and continued speaking once her breathing was regulated. "A transport plane is preparing for takeoff at IAI headquarters. Most likely, the holy sword Gram will pass by over our heads tonight as it is transported!"

Siegfried's words reverberated through the Kinugasa Library.

"So Gram will be transported tonight. 1st-Gear's Leviathan Road will finally begin in earnest."

Siegfried stood behind the counter while Itaru remained seated.

"My father must be going senile to leave this all to some kid. The provisional negotiations supposedly ended fine, but from what I hear, those negotiations were a sham."

"You certainly are harsh."

"I'm kind to myself. And that is what saves the smart ones. They run away from me."

"Do you hope Sayama Mikoto and the others will withdraw from the Leviathan Road?"

"Only kids make decisions based on what they hope for." Itaru pushed his sunglasses back up his nose. "But once Gram is stored in UCAT HQ, the real negotiations with 1st-Gear will begin."

"And that will be the true beginning of the Leviathan Road?"

"Yes. If he is still involved then, he will be unable to back out. Gram's arrival is the time limit for Sayama Mikoto. He must decide for himself by then."

Itaru reached to the end of his crossed leg and returned the slipper Sf had fixed to its half-removed state .

He shook the light blue slipper with the tips of his toes and asked a question.

"Who were you on the phone with?"

"I told you it was old comrade, didn't I? He was delighted that Sayama Mikoto has begun to take action. He said Sayama Mikoto will likely learn all sorts of things while not knowing what direction he is headed, just like we did long ago."

"And about one in a hundred of the things he does will be successes?"

"Yes. One only arrives at the truth after many failures and doubts." A small smile appeared on Siegfried's lips.

"I remember when we first learned of the Concept War in the National Defense Department days. Yes, that was when it was found out that I was only pretending to cooperate with the National Defense Department and that I had come to destroy the ley line modification facility for the German region." His smile grew bitter. "I had yet to destroy the facility and yet it was destroyed. My comrades thought I had done it, so they pursued me and a battle began. It was then that it happened."

"I've heard about this. The sky suddenly split open and a mechanical dragon and god of war dropped down. "

"It was a battle between 1st-Gear and 3rd-Gear. From that point on, we knew that the National Defense Department's job extended beyond just our world," said Siegfried. "So much was learned and so much was lost. And not all by us. If Sayama Mikoto accepts the Leviathan Road and charges ahead, will he see it all?"

"Who can say? He might run away or die before that happens. Do you remember what his grandfather would always say?"

"The surname Sayama indicates a villain?"

Itaru nodded and grinned.

"Will Sayama Mikoto be able to hold pride in the evil he commits? I am not talking about a skirmish with a small radical group or provisional negotiations against someone who is going easy on him. When faced with a true opponent, will he be able to settle things by using evil as righteousness? …And before that, will he be able to choose to step onto the battlefield? I do not know the answer to any of these questions."

As Ooshiro spoke, Siegfried closed his eyes.

"Ooshiro Itaru, you are very particular about the surname Sayama. I heard the reason why from Diana."

"Then you should understand why I hate that kid. I don't even want to see him. The surname Sayama that I know is nothing like him. It does not refer to some ignorant kid who is protected by everything."

"Itaru-sama."

Itaru's body relaxed when Sf called out from behind him.

He turned around just as Sf crouched down.

Sf once more silently fixed his slipper.

Itaru stood up, but his right leg trembled and almost gave out.

Sf reached out from the side and silently supported him.

“Here,” she said after grabbing his metal cane.

Itaru supported himself with the cane.

He straightened his back and nodded toward Siegfried .

“But… If the Leviathan Road continues forward, will my comrades take action?”

“Yes, Diana, the survivors of the National Defense Department, and the survivors of the original UCAT will take action. Mr. Zonburg, your friend is still alive.”

“I was just told as much over the phone. You mean Thunderson, right?” Siegfried frowned. “It is a shame that Yankee is still alive. He should be coming here with his great-grandchild within the year, though.”

Siegfried's comment deepened the grin on Itaru's face.

Itaru pushed his sunglasses back up to cover his eyes and bowed, all while standing at the bottom of the valley created by the bookshelves of Kinugasa Library.

"View it like a class reunion you think is a mistake, Mr . Zonburg."

Seeing his actions and hearing his words, Sf belatedly bowed as well. Itaru slowly gave one last comment.

"That is one way to look at our Leviathan Road."

Shinjou and Sayama sipped at drinks in Okutama Station as the sun set.

The wooden station building had a cement floor. They were sitting on a wooden bench by the wall at the entrance.

To get this far, they had taken a UCAT bus out to the front of IAI and then another bus from there. Sayama had to wait 20 minutes for his train, so they had plenty of time to talk.

It was the afternoon, but the entrance was almost deserted due to school not being in session. Shinjou listened to the sounds of cars and busses in the distance as she looked at the drink can in her hand.

She had never had melon soda before. She thought its flavor had less individuality than the sodas at UCAT.

She took a breath and looked at Sayama next to her. He was giving mineral water to Baku who sat on his shoulder even though he had just finished entering some numbers into the cell phone he had received at UCAT.

…Is he the type of person who can't relax without doing something?

Shinjou's own question brought a bitter smile to her lips. She searched for something to say.

"Um, what do you think about what we were told earlier? About the holy sword Gram being suddenly transported today."

Sayama looked away from Baku.

"Well." He nodded and placed Baku and the bottle next to him. "It is indeed sudden. Word arrived just as we were leaving UCAT, but I suppose it starts when it starts."

"What will you do, Sayama-kun? Will you take part in the Leviathan Road?"

"You will, won't you? You want to pursue this Shinjou from the National Defense Department that Fasolt mentioned."

"Yes. But I am talking about you, Sayama-kun, not me. "

"I see," began Sayama quietly. "Currently, I think I am leaning toward not taking part."

"Really?"

She tilted her head and Sayama nodded.

"Yes, really. In the end, I have not found an answer for myself. And now the time has come. It would be like

going in for a test without studying properly. The problem is that I would rather back out than get a bad grade on this test."

"When you say you haven't found an answer for yourself, do you mean in relation to the surname Sayama indicating a villain?"

Sayama looked a bit surprised to hear that. He quickly composed himself and nodded slowly.

"Being hated is a difficult thing. And…both the knight's group yesterday and Fasolt today took action while prepared for that. I achieved decent results both times, but I was no match for them where it really counts." He took a breath. "Take Fasolt for example. He wishes for continued peace. That requires compromise and actions that can be seen as betrayals. But he is willing to go through with it regardless. Why is that?"

"Because it's the right thing to do. Do you think the radical factions can really gain anything by fighting?"

"I do," said Sayama. "If they win and their opponent is gone, they will gain a world of peace all for themselves.

And even if they do not lose, as long as they can show off their power, they can force their fearful enemy to compromise."

"That's solving everything with strength…"

"Strength is a rudimentary form of language, Shinjou-kun. If you agree, you shake hands. If you disagree, you punch them. Even without words, that will convey your meaning. Even now, there are tribes living on the earth that use strength in their standard customs. Let me ask this instead: why must everything be resolved with words? Words are an aspect of civilization that humans did not initially have. They are a replacement for strength. Why is it necessary to resolve everything with them?"

"B-because they don't harm you or your opponent," she said while subconsciously clenching her hands.

Green fizz spilled from the drink can in her hands.

"Ah," said Shinjou as she frantically pulled a handkerchief from her pocket.

As she wiped off her hands, her thoughts were centered on her worry that Sayama did not even understand this simple concept.

…This is important. It has to be.

She nodded in her heart and thought on what she should say to Sayama. Strength entered the inside of her eyebrows and she folded up her handkerchief.

"U-um, Sayama-kun…"

She stopped before she could continue speaking.

She saw Sayama looking toward her with a powerless smile on his face.

It was a simple smile and nothing else. However…

…Why is he looking at me like that when I'm angry?

His reply came soon thereafter.

He nodded and said, "That is your answer, Shinjou-kun. You have the right to take the test. You are much more qualified than I am."

His last sentence sent a chill down Shinjou's back.

"N-no. I…I…"

"Do you want to say you could not speak with Fasolt and his absurd arguments today, with that group from yesterday, or with the werewolf the day before yesterday ? Do you want to say that you cannot fight them either?"

Shinjou nodded.

"Why is it they refuse to talk things out?" asked Sayama.

"B-because…um…they have grudges that cannot be settled with words?"

"Yes. And so they refuse to sit at the negotiating table to talk things out. In other words, those who wish for peace can only speak with others who wish for a peaceful conclusion. However..."

"However?"

"Even those who do not wish for peace lose things in war. In fact… They are the ones who cannot forgive those losses, so they may be the ones who truly hate war. "

"…"

"In that case, what does it mean to make up for our crimes? Is it enough to make it up only to those who already assume a peaceful resolution? Is it really best to not even touch on those who wish for our deaths?"

"B-but if we stand before them, they might kill us, Sayama-kun."

"That is why the Leviathan Road has given us power," said Sayama. "I think I understand the meaning behind the initial conditions my grandfather gave the Leviathan Road. I think I understand why he has given us no information and has allowed us to fight."

Sayama folded his arms and leaned back in the wooden bench. He could feel the chill of the rough wooden planks that sat at uneven heights.

"There are those in the ten Gears who hope for our deaths or defeat. Why do they wish for death? We have not been given any information on the past so that we can truly understand that and make use of that reason."

"You mean knowledge we are given without searching it out has no value?"

"Yes. Knowledge only becomes wisdom if you have the will to learn. If we are given prepackaged knowledge and try to use it as a shield, the other races will not feel any sincerity in us."

Sayama picked up Baku. The beast had been sticking its head in the clear bottle to peer at the water within, but he now flailed his limbs as he hung down. Once his gaze met Sayama's he calmed down.

Sayama lowered Baku and tipped the bottle on its side. Baku stuck his head in the bottle's opening and drank the water.

Shinjou smiled bitterly at the small animal's behavior. Sayama made a similar smile.

"We are using Baku here in our investigation so we can view the past with no glorification or distortion. We must decide for ourselves based on that. And…"

"We must negotiate using strength, words, and every other means available to us?"

"Yes. This is why my grandfather left the Leviathan Road to me. The surname Sayama indicates a villain, so he wanted me to take that knowledge and wisdom and make what decisions I had to."

Sayama closed his eyes.

He did not look at Shinjou or anything else around him.

"But," he began. "Just because I have that knowledge and wisdom does not mean my evil is needed. After all, my grandfather did not always use that method."

Sayama sensed Shinjou stiffening next to him. Eventually, she spoke.

"You probably should rethink this. This may indeed be a good role for you, Sayama-kun. But it's wrong. It isn't

right to end everything by making someone the villain. Even if it's important to you, I think it's wrong."

"But I am interested in the Leviathan Road. …If possible, I would like to take part."

"But… can you trust yourself when you get serious?"

Sayama sighed.

He opened his eyes. The ends of Shinjou's eyebrows were lowered as she stared at him.

She is a welcome person to have around, he thought.

He looked her in the eye and several seconds of silence followed.

Finally, Shinjou looked down and spoke as if checking on something.

"Sayama-kun, do you really want to take part in the Leviathan Road?"

Sayama thought on her question. He thought back over everything and found only one answer.

"Yes."

"I see. Then…think up some way of resolving this. Think up a way you can get serious and remain confident." Shinjou lightly embraced her own body while still looking down. "If only there was some standard you could use when conflicted over whether your actions are a necessary evil or not. …I don't know how you could know that, though."

"A standard for necessary evil…? In other words, a villain's requirement," muttered Sayama.

He looked down at his feet and thought.

…A standard to know for sure what I am doing is wrong, hm?

When he thought about it, it was a simple matter. To know whether he was wrong or not…

…I just need someone by my side who is right.

He needed someone who was the opposite of himself. When he realized that, his pulse began to race.

"…"

He needed someone who could be a standard for him. He needed someone who would allow him to meet the proper requirements. And someone like that was already by his side.

He could easily know whether he was wrong or not if he looked at that person.

But Sayama had tried to keep that person out of his mind.

After all, if he took part in the Leviathan Road, it would mean that person would be standing in the same place as him. That person would be standing at the receiving end of grudges and could be killed. He had wanted to avoid that.

"…"

He silently began to sweat. His pulse grew even faster.

What is this? he thought. *This is not like me.*

He just had to tell that person he needed them. He had to ask that person to stand with him on the battlefield and sit with him at the negotiating table. He had to ask tht person to accept enmity and death alongside him.

It was selfish.

Being hated as a villain was an issue for him alone, but this would be dragging another person down along with him.

However, that person's voice reached his ears. It was a gentle and quiet voice.

It said, "I hope you can find a standard for yourself, Sayama-kun."

Sayama stood up.

With the rustling of his suit, he looked at her. He looked at the opposite of himself who could act as his standard.

He looked at the girl named Shinjou.

Shinjou backed away slightly with her drink can in her hands.

Before her eyes, Sayama had stood up after letting his head droop down for a while. He was looking at her. He was wrinkling his brow and seemed to want to say something. That was why Shinjou had pulled back.

"Wh-what is it?"

Her question caused Sayama to jump as if he had suddenly realized something.

All strength suddenly left his expression. His usual expression quickly returned. This expression was almost a lack of expression. However, Shinjou thought his slightly downward-cast face appeared conflicted.

…Is something the matter?

Shinjou tilted her head.

"Did something happen? Is it about the Leviathan Road or your standard?"

As she spoke, Shinjou wondered what it was she was worried about.

She had said the Leviathan Road was dangerous, but once he had said he wanted to take part, she had given him self-important advice and was trying to help him again.

I must truly want… she began silently.

She wanted him to take part in the Leviathan Road.

She did not want him to die or be hated, but he could do things she could not. She wanted that.

She recalled when they had first met. She remembered when she had let him rest on her lap in that forest. He had admitted that she was right. She had always thought she was wrong, but he had said she was right.

And on the way back that night, she had apologized for forcing her thoughts onto him, but he had smiled and said she had done nothing of the sort.

She wondered if it was strange to be happy about having her thoughts denied.

…To me, he is right and is a welcome person to have around .

Shinjou nodded in her heart.

…I wonder if there is anything I can do to help him.

After the negotiations with Fasolt when he had been depressed over being unable to get serious, she had not been able to say anything.

She decided she needed to say something now. She opened her mouth to speak. The first time, only her lips moved. The second time, she produced a voice.

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

Sayama turned back toward her. He lowered his head once more, looked up, and…

"…"

The train created a loud noise as it entered the station. The wheels caused the track to creak and Sayama turned around.

The sounds of the train slowed and finally stopped.

When Sayama turned back toward her, his expression was back to normal. However, this brought no relief to

Shinjou. He always acted the way he did because he wanted to be strong.

Sayama looked at her as they listened to the footsteps of the people walking from the platform to the entrance.

“Shinjou-kun, one quick thing.”

His voice was back to its normal tone when he spoke.

The words he had been about to speak with that shaken expression would not be coming. Shinjou felt a disappointed emptiness in her chest, but still tilted her head. If he had any complaints, she would listen.

“What? What is it?”

In her slightly titled vision, she saw Sayama pull the digital recorder from his pocket and hold it up.

The area was filled with the footsteps and other noises of the people on the platform.

Sayama ignored them and spoke with a serious expression.

"I forgot to ask about the continuation from before. You said you jumped when you thought I was going to touch your butt, but what happened then? Please tell me in great detail."

As her vision twitched with thoughts similar to "you're one stubborn bastard", she saw Sayama check the watch on his left wrist.

"I have no time, but I am terribly curious. Come on. There is nothing to fear. Tell me forcefully and intensely!"

After that final comment, Shinjou forcefully and intensely slapped Sayama.

The art room curtain began to grow dyed in crimson.

Brunhild stood petrified as the black cat stood on the floor in front of her. Her right hand held the blue stone used to return the wind to the form of a cat. The small bird sat on her shoulder and she spoke in a slightly trembling voice.

"The holy sword Gram is…what?"

The black cat was catching its breath with its limbs sprawled out on the floor.

"It seems IAI HQ is sending Gram by air to the IAI Tokyo branch. He said…" The cat took a breath. "They will be shooting it down."

"So a battle cannot be avoided now."

"Fafner said you should return right away. He said he would leave taking care of Siegfried to you."

"Eh?"

A movement came over Brunhild's expressionless face. This movement was produced by strength.

When the black cat saw that expression, it turned away .

"If Gram is retrieved, its master, Siegfried, is sure to take action. Fafner said he would be left to you. Brunhild, " called the black cat. "Everyone is expecting to see the cries of resentment contained in the scythe of the underworld."

Brunhild shook her head and stopped moving.

The small bird on her shoulder chirped.

Brunhild did not move when she heard it.

All expression had left her face. There was not even enough there to call it expressionless. It was as if all color had been lost from her face.

"…"

Brunhild remained silent, hung her head, and closed her eyes.

She bit her lower lip and knitted her brow.

A slight breath leaked from deep in her throat.

The black cat looked up at her. When it realized she had her eyes closed, the cat partially closed its own eyes, hung its head down, and gave a small nod.

"Okay," mouthed the cat before looking up. "Brunhild ?"

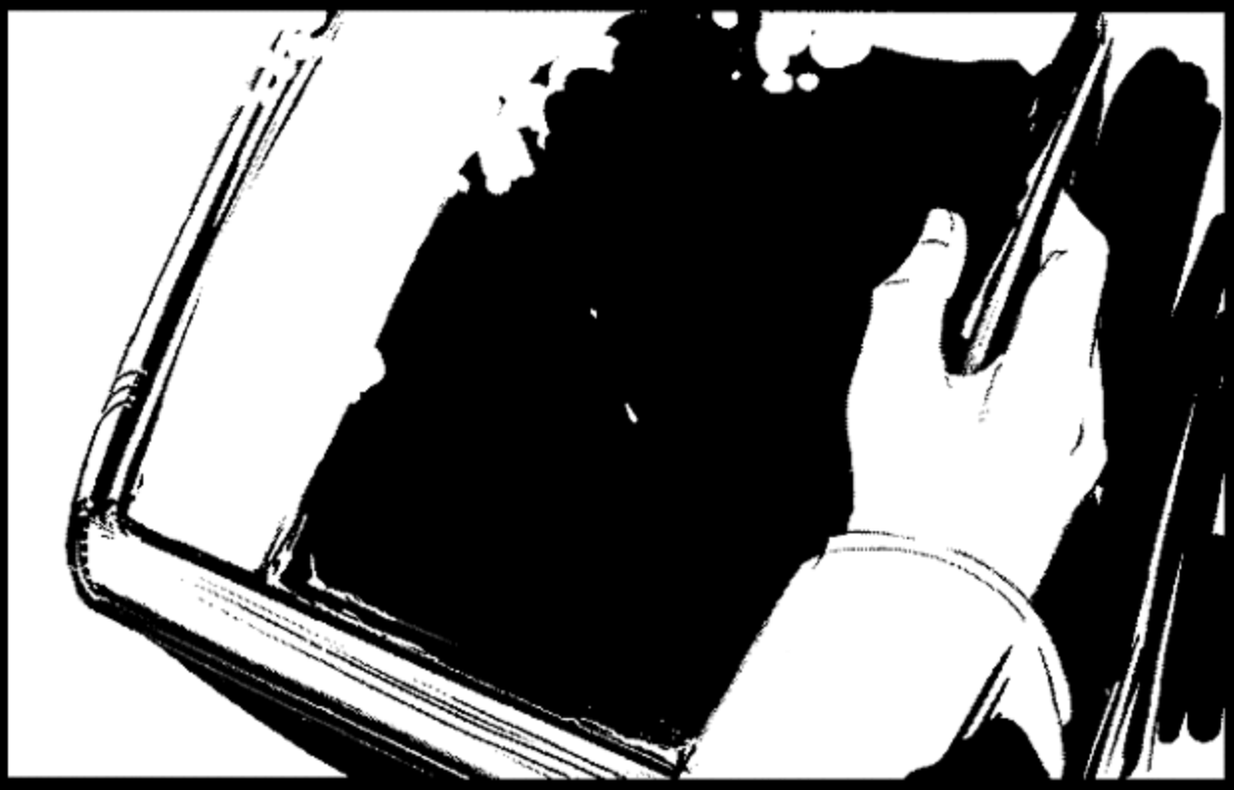
Brunhild opened her eyes. By the time their gazes met, the cat was looking at its owner the same as ever.

“Brunhild,” called the cat once more. “I am doing my best to be your ally.”

Chapter 21: The Path to Relief

Chapter 21

“The Path to Relief”



When one steps off that path
Pain appears before one’s eyes
So what happens if one wishes for pain?

When one steps off that path

Pain appears before one's eyes

So what happens if one wishes for pain?

Sayama returned to the school and walked to the Kinugasa Library.

He took a seat at a table near the counter, opened a book, and read through it.

He placed one side of the book on the table and flipped through the pages with only his right arm. It was the first volume of the mythology research books written by Kinugasa Tenkyou. He was reading the portion related to the Nibelungen epic poem.

The old letterpress printing style caused the pictures to bleed through the pages, but it was easy enough to make out the writing.

The Nibelungen was a European epic primarily passed down in Germany that was based on the Norse legend known as the Volsunga Saga.

"According to the saga, a young man named Sigurd trained under a man named Regin and slayed a dragon named Fafnir with the holy sword Gram he was given. When he drank some of Fafnir's blood, he became able to hear the voices of animals. The birds informed him that Regin planned to kill him to take the honor for himself."

He flipped the page.

"After killing Regin, Sigurd fell in love with a woman named Brynhildr, but he was made to forget her with magic and he instead chose a woman named Gudrun. However, Brynhildr resented him when she found out and decided to destroy them all."

As Sayama closed the book, another voice continued the story.

"In the saga, Sigurd was killed by an assassin in his sleep, but in the epic poem, he died after being stabbed

through the heart from the spot on the left of his back that had not been covered in Fafnir's blood due to a leaf falling there."

Those words were spoken by the tall man holding a paper cup behind the counter.

Sayama turned toward him and asked, "This has a few terms in common with reality. …Have you ever noticed that? In German, Sigurd has the name Siegfried. And Gudrun is Gutrune. …Has anyone else checked on those terms in common?"

"No, they have not."

"I see." Sayama tapped the spine of the hardcover book. "I suppose that would also be the answer if there was no need to check."

The slight tapping noise caused Baku to raise his head and emulate it by tapping Sayama's shoulder. Sayama smiled bitterly.

"What does it feel like to be hated?"

Siegfried took a sip from his cup before answering.

"The one saving grace is that all that enmity will end when I die. I have been targeted a few times in the past, but they were not ideal, so I did not die."

"Hah. You have quite the troublesome death wish. … So what kind of death do you want?"

"Being killed by someone I betrayed and still hates me would simply be too horrible for me to accept. That would be identical to Sigurd's death."

Siegfried placed his cup on the counter and laughed at the hard sound of the paper.

"Sayama Mikoto, give this thought. Give this serious thought. Being hated will be inevitable. The question is how small you can make that grudge and who it is that will understand you."

"And did you fail on both counts?"

Siegfried remained silent, so Sayama sighed.

"What a troublesome idea. Being an adult really is troublesome. You knew something like this could be waiting for you, so why?"

Sayama turned toward Siegfried. And he slowly spoke as if to himself.

"Why did you get involved in the Concept War?"

In the center of Sayama's vision, the old man stared directly back at him and did not move.

Sayama waited. He waited for his words to vanish from the air of that library.

And once everything had returned to silence, his answer came.

"That was after I had managed to escape fighting in World War Two. I knew all too well that I would lose something if I fought. I did not want any more war. However…"

Siegfried trailed off, but he did not stop. He shook his head and continued.

"Everyone has their own reason for fighting. There is no meaning in me telling you mine. No matter how many ideals they hold, a human will die from a single bullet. When you see that truth before your eyes, you will see what your true motives are."

"You mean I will see what is worth risking losing my life to a single bullet?"

Siegfried nodded.

"I will not tell you not to fear death. But do not look back. If you want to remain an idealist, do not step onto the battlefield. And if you do step onto the battlefield, do not die. Do you understand what I mean, at least somewhat? You have experienced the battlefield twice now due to our skirmishes with 1st-Gear. What did you think of the people there and of yourself?"

Sayama nodded, thought about the werewolf and the knight, and finally thought about Shinjou.

He kept in his heart the thought of her trembling yet still stepping onto the battlefield and then he tried to say something.

"…"

He was unable to say it.

However, he understood what he and she had in common. He understood what it was they both wanted.

"A battlefield on which we might die, hm?"

There was no doubting what they would find there.

Everything else was up to him. With that in mind, Sayama stood up.

"Thank you. You helped guide me in the right direction."

He slid the book across the table and grabbed it in his right hand as it began to fall off the edge. His left arm was still not fully healed.

With the book hanging down from his right hand, Sayama walked toward the shelf of books by Kinugasa.

And as he did, he looked outside the narrow portion of window visible between the bookshelves.

The window showed the sun to the southwest and a figure jogging down the road toward the main entrance.

It was Shinjou Setsu. He had his hair bound behind his neck and he held a wash basin and a towel in front of his chest.

…Is he visiting the public bath I told him about last night?

It was quite early for a bath. A glance at his watch told him it was 4:30 PM.

Just as he began to wonder why Shinjou would take a bath so early, a thought came to Sayama.

"Is he actually her?"

"Did you just say something rather odd?"

Sayama ignored the old man.

…Is that why he is bathing while no one else will be around ?

It was only a hypothesis. He would never find the answer if he did not check.

And that meant he had to go. He had to check once more whether Shinjou Setsu was actually Shinjou Sadame.

He made up his mind and began to move.

"…"

Sayama quickly returned the book to the bookshelf and took quick steps across the library.

His footsteps were loud and Siegfried frowned.

“Excuse me,” said Sayama with a wave of the arm.

Leaving the library and running back to the student dorm would take two minutes. If he chased after Shinjou, he would arrive just as the boy was entering the bathtub. He would be able to catch him in the act.

Sayama would be victorious. With that in mind, he opened the library door. But then…

“Oh.”

He brought himself to a stop.

Someone stood directly in front of him. A small figure stood beyond the opened door in the hallway filled with the light of the setting sun.

A black cat stood at the person’s feet. It was a girl holding a cardboard box with a small bird inside.

Siegfried called her name from behind Sayama.

"Brunhild-kun."

Brunhild watched Sayama Mikoto rush past her. He was nonsensically muttering "bath" over and over, so it did not seem related to 1st-Gear.

Brunhild took a step forward as she listened to those fading footsteps.

As she did, Siegfried stepped out from behind the counter. He moved quickly and with long strides. It only took him five steps.

"Do you have another problem with the bird?"

Brunhild expressionlessly shook her head. There was something she had to say.

…Will I be able to say it this time?

Brunhild opened her mouth as she thought about the previous night. Her lips moved as she practiced the words.

The fact that she noticed that movement showed that her legs were not trembling and her body was not cowering.

And so Brunhild raised her head. Her hair waved, she created a face she thought of as expressionless, and she looked up at his blue eyes.

“I will be leaving until tomorrow morning, so please look after the bird.”

“This is quite sudden.”

It looked as if Siegfried’s eyes had widened slightly.

However, he was not refusing or rebuking her. She closed her eyes, lowered her head, and held out the arms holding the box.

“Yes, but…take care of it.” Her head drooped down even further. “Please. You only need to look after it until tomorrow morning.”

She raised her head. She made sure her movements did not cause her to draw back the box.

As she looked at him, Siegfried finally nodded.

“Tomorrow morning, you said?”

“Yes. I will be back by then.”

“I see.”

Siegfried nodded once more and took the box.

Brunhild almost breathed a sigh of relief, but she resisted.

Without changing her expression, she looked at the bird in the box. It tilted its head as it looked back up at her. Siegfried took the box and the bird must have been afraid to leave her because it spread it wings.

And it flapped them.

“…”

However, it could not fly. It fell over, stood back up, and looked up at her again.

Brunhild spoke to the bird.

"Don't worry. He understands the language of birds."

As soon as she said that, Brunhild heard a quiet laugh. She looked up at Siegfried's face, but his expression was the same as ever.

"Is something the matter?"

"N-no. It is nothing. …Thank you for helping."

With that quick comment Brunhild turned around.

After the third step, she heard the library door close behind her and the chirping of the bird grew more distant.

She passed through the central lobby and headed for the art room. The black cat sighed down at her feet.

"You managed to say the words you had prepared."

"Yes. I wonder why."

"Because this is something you knew was important."

"Really?" she asked before having a thought.

If what the cat said was true, was it the bird or the man she had found to be important?

A shopping district had been built just outside the main entrance of the school.

In it was a 24-hour public bath named Eternal Sunflower.

It was an old-looking facility made of concrete and with a tiled roof, but it stood out because of the large greenhouse with a metal framework to the south. Tropical plants and out of season sunflowers were visible in that three-story structure.

The curtains labeling the men's bath and the women's bath had a sunflower mark printed on them.

"The 24-hour public bath named Eternal Sunflower uses underground pipes to use the heat of the school's boiler facility. It has a few sister facilities outside the school, but this is the one I told Shinjou-kun about last night."

Sayama passed by the attendant booth, greeted the old woman who worked as the attendant during the day, and put a 100 yen coin in the ticket machine.

He took the card-style locker key the ticket machine gave him and he moved Baku from his shoulder to his head. He removed his clothes in the changing area, placed them in a locker, and draped a towel over his shoulder.

He removed the bandages from his left arm, making the charm covering the wound visible. It had shown no sign of growing damp during his shower the day before, so Sayama assumed it held some sort of power.

He locked the locker and his preparations were complete.

Just to check, he weighed himself at the scale. His weight was the same as the day before.

Everything was going well. All that was left was to head into the bath with nothing but his towel. Using the public bath's wash basins was the stylish thing to do. And opening the bath door with both hands was the Sayama style.

"Here I go," said Sayama as he took the first step inside.

The steam-filled bath was large. Four square bathtubs that were 10 meters across were lined up to the left and right and washing areas were prepared along the walls.

As he walked down the center area between the bathtubs, his footsteps sounded quietly on the cooled bathwater below.

Sayama searched for his target in his vision that was obscured by the color white.

And he spotted that target. He was in the farthest bathtub on Sayama's left. Sayama had spotted the color black on the closest corner of that tub.

That color was the color of hair.

Sayama walked in that direction as if cutting through the steam.

As he approached, he saw slender shoulders and black hair dropping into the wash basin sitting outside the bathtub.

That back was submerged up to the bottom of the shoulders, but it was definitely Shinjou's.

…He should submerge himself up to the neck.

After deciding he needed to give Shinjou that advice, Sayama began thinking about how to make his approach.

From the boy's reaction at their first meeting, Shinjou Setsu seemed to be needlessly wary.

Sayama needed to approach him in a way that lowered his guard.

He considered showing unpredictability by leaping into the bathtub or showing open-heartedness by stepping over Shinjou's head, but he concluded a safer option would be better.

Even as he thought, Sayama continued to approach and observe. He could see the side of Shinjou's face as he soaked in the tub. His eyes were closed and his expression was relaxed. His body that Sayama was so curious about was sitting on one of the steps on the inside of the tub and his arms were embracing himself.

His arms and the towel worn within the tub hid that body.

…He is wearing the towel inside the bathtub?

Shinjou's action made Sayama feel a bit dizzy, but he endured. He could not put Shinjou on guard. However, it was true he could check on his body if the towel were not there. He had to eliminate that trap.

What came first was the boy's wariness. If Sayama could eliminate that, the rest would be easy.

Sayama silently got down on his knees behind that back soaking in the bathtub. He picked up a nearby wash basin and spoke in order to lower Shinjou's guard.

"Sir, would you like me to wash your back?"

Shinjou turned around in shock and…

"W-waaah!!"

He let out a scream and fell full force into the bathtub.

A splash and steam filled the air and his long hair was dragged into the tub.

Sayama climbed over the edge of the tub and placed his legs in the waves of hot water, but he remained on his knees.

“What a noisy child. You must not swim in the bath tub.”

“Wh-why are you talking about my back all of a sudden!?”

“I merely wish to wash your back. There is no need to be suspicious.”

“That’s plenty suspicious!!”

There is no reasoning with this person, thought Sayama as he brought a hand to his forehead.

Shinjou stood while hiding his body with his towel and then remained motionless. Through the steam, Sayama could see Shinjou’s eyebrows raised.

“Why are you so suspicious?”

"This has nothing to do with suspicion. …Did you even stop to think what the people who see this might think!?"

Shinjou pointed toward the washing areas along the wall. Soaking at the edge of the bathtub with his arms spread was…

"Oh, it's Izumo."

"Hey," said Izumo as he raised a hand in greeting.

Sayama nodded and said, "Do not worry, Shinjou-kun. That is not a person, so his opinion does not count."

"Sayama, you idiot, have you ever seen my chromosomes?"

"I can tell without looking. You clearly have about two more than a human."

"Really? I must be pretty great to have more than a human."

"Um… Don't chimpanzees have two more chromosomes than humans?" commented Shinjou.

"What? Screw you, Sayama… You… You're pretty smart, you idiot."

"This does not matter, so calm down."

Izumo had begun to stand up, but he sank back down and let out a breath. He looked back and forth between Sayama and Shinjou.

"I don't know what the confusion is about, Sayama, but you need to wash yourself before entering the bathtub. That is one of the five rules of Eternal Sunflower ."

Sayama nodded and looked toward Shinjou. He stood in the center of the bathtub.

"Why do you look so angry?" asked Sayama.

"B-because, well…"

"I do not believe I have done anything to you yet."

"How about you say his very existence is odd? And wait… What do you mean 'yet'?"

Sayama ignored that suggestion from Izumo. At any rate, Shinjou would have no escape once Sayama washed himself.

He stood up and walked to the washing area. Behind him, he heard Shinjou walk through the tub and back to his previous spot. He could see it in the washing area's mirror. Sayama sat in a seat placed in front of that mirror near Izumo. Before using the shower, Sayama filled a nearby wash basin with water a bit cooler than human skin and placed Baku inside.

Baku floated for a bit, but then sank without struggling.

Sayama pulled him out and placed his front legs on the edge of the wash basin. Baku seemed to be a nonresistant animal.

Sayama took a breath, untangled his swept back hair and ran his hands through it.

"Izumo," he said quietly.

"What is it, you idiot?"

"I have a question for you."

"Oh? What lowly question do you have from someone as great as me?"

Sayama nodded and began rubbing the provided soap on his skin.

"How was Shinjou-kun's body?"

Sayama saw Izumo turn toward him in the mirror. He nodded once with a serious expression.

"Here is my opinion on this matter: you are insane. Well? Do you get it? If not, let me put it more simply. You. Are. An. Idiot. Well? Get it now?"

"I see you still have no reservations about saying hurtful things. Go to hell, you son of a bitch." Sayama took a breath and stared straight at Izumo through the mirror. "I am not joking about this. I am completely serious. …How was Shinjou-kun's body?"

In the mirror, Izumo's face darkened, his expression clouded over, and he averted his gaze.

"Sorry. I didn't realize you were serious."

"I am. As long as you understand."

"Yeah, sorry. I would never have thought you were serious. I'm satisfied with Chisato."

"I see. Then I suppose I asked you something you cannot answer. Is this where I should say, 'die, you useless bastard'?"

"Is this where I should say, 'get lost, you gay bastard'?"

Just as Sayama silently held the shower in his left hand and the valve for the hot water in his right, he heard a splash behind him.

He checked in the mirror and saw a back with long black hair trying to sneak out of the bathtub.

You are not getting away, thought Sayama as he brushed up his hair once, turned around, lowered his hips, and dashed.

"Wait just a second!"

As he ran, he saw Shinjou try to turn around.

He could not let Shinjou prepare. Making sure Shinjou did not notice took top priority.

To escape Shinjou's sight, Sayama dropped to his knees on the wet tile floor.

He slid on his knees through the puddles of water.

As his sliding produced a wet noise, he saw Shinjou's eyes cut across horizontally as if he had lost sight of something.

In the next moment, he grabbed hold of Shinjou's waist.

That backwards-turned naked body gave a start when Sayama's hands grabbed onto its waist.

Shinjou looked down at Sayama from above. He had to twist his shoulders and neck around to do so.

"Wh-what are you doing, Sayama-kun!?"

While sitting on his knees, Sayama held onto Shinjou as he tried to twist his body around and escape.

"Calm down."

"Wh-what!? I don't understand what you mean!"

"You do not understand? I am saying to remain relaxed and tranquil while not panicking."

"That isn't what I meant!!" shouted Shinjou, but he stopped trying to escape. He blushed and asked, " Wh-what is it? If you need something, just tell me already!"

"There is something I must see. It is not something you can simply tell me. And… It is an important matter for you."

"Important?' Shinjou frowned and averted his gaze. Finally, he said, "Y-you aren't going to do some other strange thing to me, are you?"

"Of course not. When have I ever done anything strange to you?"

"U-um, Sayama-kun? …Please look either to your right or left."

Sayama chose left. He looked over and saw himself and Shinjou in a mirror in a washing area.

He was sitting on his knees and he had his arms wrapped around Shinjou's butt.

It was nothing more than one step in the process of determining if Shinjou was a girl or not.

"I see nothing strange there," he commented.

Shinjou hung his head down with a look of realization.

"Oh, I get it now. Strange people do not realize how strange they are."

"Such a sad story."

"I'm talking about you!!"

"It seems you have a persecution complex. ...At any rate, please stay still."

"Uuh…" groaned Shinjou.

Sayama lowered his head and looked forward.

There he found a butt. The two round humps were sticking out toward him a bit because of how he was holding on to Shinjou. Water droplets from the bath could be seen on it. His body line extending up and down to his waist and thighs swelled out.

It is very round, thought Sayama. *How magnificent.*

He squeezed with his hands a bit and those round humps distorted softly. The water droplets that had collected between the flesh made their way around and dripped down. Seeing that, Sayama gave a mental sigh of admiration.

…*How erotic,* he thought earnestly.

But as soon as he realized what he had thought, he shook his head.

He needed to see if Shinjou was female or not. This was no time to be holding a viewing of Shinjou's ass. However…

"How can I sum up this beauty in a single word?"

It was round and erotic. Sayama thought for a moment , let out a breath, and expressed it in a single world.

"Eroundic."

"Wh-what? What did you just say!?"

"I merely found a new expression is all. Do not worry about it."

Sayama realized he could not determine Shinjou's sex from the butt. That was obvious. And so he spoke.

"Now, let us do this. Turn toward me, Shinjou-kun."

"U-u-um, Sayama-kun? Do you know what you're saying? And what do you mean 'do this'?"

"It is too late to ask questions! This is important!" shouted Sayama.

All strength left Shinjou's body. Sayama looked up and saw the ends of his eyebrows drooping.

"D-do I really…have to turn toward you?"

"Yes. There is something I cannot know otherwise."

"…"

Shinjou averted his gaze without speaking and Sayama loosened his grip on Shinjou's butt.

Shinjou slowly turned toward him. He stood with his knees together, but Sayama showed no kindness.

"Why are you acting so embarrassed? Move that towel and your arms."

"D-do I really have to show you? Th-this isn't right. You're going to do something strange, aren't you?'

"How many times do I have to tell you? This is important for you, Shinjou-kun."

"Really? Is it really important for the two of us? Is it really?"

Sayama stared silently back and Shinjou closed his eyes a bit. His cheeks reddened, he bit his lower lip, and his body stiffened.

"Don't do anything weird."

Shinjou dropped the towel. The wet cloth softly struck the floor.

However, Shinjou was still using his hands to cover his chest and the area between his legs.

"Move your hands," said Sayama.

Shinjou did not nod. However, he lifted his hands, let out a moan, and covered his face with those hands.

Sayama had watched the hands move up, but he now slowly lowered that gaze.

The eyes on that blushing face looked down at him through the gaps in the fingers.

His shoulders were drooping down and the chest between them was flat. It was the same chest Sayama had touched the day before.

Water droplets ran down his damp skin from the chest to his sides and navel. The water seemed to dissolve into his skin.

Sayama followed the falling water droplets with his gaze. He finally arrived at Shinjou's crotch.

"Hm…"

"Wh-what does that mean? N-no. Don't stare like that."

"My apologies."

Sayama had confirmed that Shinjou was a boy. The proof lay right before his eyes. It was certainly there.

Sayama had no more room for doubt and he felt a sense of loss at having his suspicions disappear.

Shinjou spoke from above in a trembling voice.

"A-are you done? You are, right? You've seen enough, right?"

Sayama started to agree, but then his thoughts ground to a halt.

…Wait a second. I can clearly see it before my eyes, but…

What if this was some kind of trick?

He knew the level of technology UCAT had. They could easily pull something like this off.

If he was going to check, he had to do so thoroughly enough to have no doubts remaining.

However, Shinjou's guard was currently raised. Asking for permission here would likely only be wasted time.

And so Sayama gently grabbed it.

The texture, the warmth, the weight, and the material all checked out. That left strength.

In what was more an examination than a confirmation, Sayama tugged downwards.

He tugged a total of three times, changing the direction slightly each time.

"Hm."

But it did not come off. That meant it was not a trick.

He knew for sure now. There was no mistaking it. His suspicions finally vanished.

Yes, this confirms it, thought Sayama as he raised his head.

He breathed a sigh of relief and his shoulders drooped. He looked Shinjou in the eye and a slight smile naturally formed on his lips. This was good news. He nodded and spoke.

"You can rest easy, Shinjou-kun. You are a boy."

"I already knew that!!"

A slap arrived from below his field of vision as if the hand were scooping something up.

It struck Sayama's jaw, his head rotated backwards, and he collapsed to the side.

The setting sun sank into the mountain range to the west.

In the city, the movements of that crimson light could only be seen from a high vantage point.

A pair of eyes followed that sinking sun from the rooftop of Takaakita Academy's second year general school building. Those eyes were above the bell tower attached to the roof. A single figure sat there.

The figure wore black clothes and a three-cornered hat . That girl holding a broom with a giant scythe tied to it was Brunhild.

She looked toward the silhouette of the western mountain range outlined by the setting sun. She remained perfectly still, held her arms around her knees, and hid so those down below would be unable to see her.

A black cat sat next to her. The cat looked up at its unmoving owner and tilted its head.

While still looking to the west, Brunhild expressionlessly spoke.

"Don't worry. I have already dealt with my problem."

"Really?"

"Yes, this will tell me everything. If he arrives when we take back the holy sword Gram, it will mean he has

abandoned the bird I left with him. I will know he has betrayed me."

"And if he does not come?"

"Then I will forgive him," said Brunhild while narrowing her eyes slightly. A small sigh escaped her lips. "But this question is a one-way issue. I will not return here. If we win, I will join the negotiations alongside Lord Hagen as a member of 1st-Gear. If we lose, I will die."

"So you won't be coming back." The black cat's head drooped. "Then I should confess something. I was the one that tore up the calendar in your room."

"That is fine. It was provided by the school, so I forgive you."

"Thanks. But I was also the one that destroyed the cup the school gave you."

"I see… I quite liked that cup, but I will not be returning. I forgive you."

"I also stained your pillow with drool and camouflaged it so it looked like you did it."

"I see… So that's what happened."

"Also, I hid where I peed a bit under your blanket. That is why it has smelled recently."

"…I see. So that's what the smell was. If there is anything else, say it now. You will be freed from your pain."

"Just out of curiosity, what do you mean by freed from my pain?"

"You will not have to feel anything ever again… Wait, don't run away!"

When Brunhild began to stand, she saw the cityscape lit up by the setting sun.

"…"

She stopped moving and looked out in every direction. She saw houses, buildings, fields, small forests, and a mesh of roads.

That entire landscape did not realize she was here standing in the light wind.

For some reason, she frowned. The black cat turned toward her.

"What is it?"

"Nothing." Brunhild reached out a hand and grabbed the cat. "Farewell, scenery. You are completely different from the forest I once lived in."

With those words, Brunhild nodded and enacted her punishment.

Sayama and Izumo each drank a bottle of coffee milk on a bench in Eternal Sunflower's meeting area. The wooden bench had faded red paint and it creaked under Izumo's large body.

When Sayama saw he still had some milk left in his bottle, he placed it on its side next to him. He lowered Baku from his head, and the beast stuck its head in the sideways bottle and began licking up the remaining milk.

"That is a truly useless animal."

"Apparently, it actually lives by watching and showing people's pasts and dreams. It will eat anything you give it, though."

"But what do you think, Sayama? Putting a hand on your hips when drinking coffee milk is the standard, but what about using both hands?"

With an outline of the bottle around his mouth, Izumo looked over his shoulder. Sayama followed his gaze and found the curtain for the women's bath.

"Are you waiting for Kazami?"

"Did you even listen to my majestic comment?"

"I avoid doing things which have no value for my life."

"I don't see how those bizarre actions of yours in the bath have any value to your life."

"They do. Now I will make no misunderstandings about Shinjou-kun."

"I think you'll be the one people have misunderstandings about now… That was a splendid concussion. There's nothing harder to describe than a guy collapsed in the bath with his ass sticking out."

"I have not received a blow that solid in quite a long time. I must have let my guard down."

Izumo sighed when he heard that. He looked around and confirmed that no one else was nearby.

He placed his empty bottle on the ground and spoke.

"Speaking of valuable things, what are you going to do about the Leviathan Road?"

"You mean that scene of death?"

"Yes. You saw Chisato's shot, right? And then the enemy killed himself. A situation like that might come to us next time."

"Then why do you and Kazami take part?"

"I'm the son of IAI's president…and there's some other issues, too." Izumo turned toward Sayama without

a hint of a smile on his face. “We are prepared. But what about you? There’s nothing in your school life, but it’s better than dying, right?”

“That is true, but what do you think would happen if I did not agree to the Leviathan Road?”

“Our unit would be broken up. The adults would handle it. Our supervisor is Ooshiro Itaru, after all.”

“Ooshiro Itaru… Does he have that much power?”

“I don’t really know. Most members of Japanese UCAT died along with IAI’s relief team during the great Kansai earthquake at the end of 1995. From what I hear, they got wrapped up in a secondary disaster.”

“Is that what led to Japanese UCAT being temporarily dissolved? I heard about that from Fasolt.”

“Yeah. After that, it seems only the upper levels and Ooshiro Itaru were left. In fact, it seems he’s the only middle-generation member of Japanese UCAT left.”

“That’s a lot of ‘it seems’… I thought you were the heir to the Izumo company?”

"Sorry, but I wasn't here at that time," said Izumo as he folded his arms. He groaned, looked up, looked down , and tilted his head. "The thing is, I… Okay, I'll just say it. I'm a troublesome kid who was born to my Low-Gear father and a 10th-Gear girl."

"Is that so? What a surprise. Truly unexpected."

"Don't dismiss my important announcement like it's nothing…"

"It does not benefit me in any way. And being of mixed race is very common these days."

"Ha ha. I guess someone with a troublesome family of his own would think that way. But let me tell you something else: even if you do not accept the Leviathan Road, Kazami and I will be part of Team Leviathan with Ooshiro Itaru as the negotiator."

"Why? You make it sound like you cannot refuse."

"We can't," said Izumo. "Our weapons are concept weapons we acquired during the commotion when I arrived two years ago. My V-Sw is 6th's Vajra and Vritra. Kazami's G-Sp2 is 10th's Gungnir."

Sayama recalled Izumo's large single-edged sword and Kazami's long single-edged spear.

"Both give the Concept Core a cowling in the form of a weapon. The very existence of a concept weapon is a concept, so it creates its own field and its power can be used under the effects of any concept. Also, our weapons have much greater power than the normal philosopher's stone method because they use Concept Cores. Their users have to see things through to the end."

"And both of the weapons have accepted you as their masters?"

"Yeah. They both have wills of their own. We obtained them during the commotion two years ago, so 6th has fully aligned with UCAT and 10th has mostly joined UCAT. At the very least, the Leviathan Road for 6th- and 10th-Gears are already over." Izumo gave a bitter grin. " Those concept weapons really will come flying to you if you call for them."

"That is quite the bizarre phenomenon."

"Ha ha ha. You don't believe me do you, you dumb bastard?"

"Ha ha ha. Try not to speak your nonsense aloud, you son of a bitch."

The two of them both let out a sigh. Sayama brought a hand to his chin and spoke.

"So the Leviathan Road will continue without me. With you, Kazami, and Ooshiro Itaru."

"Yeah. I heard your grandfather's blood pressure shot up when he heard about my irregular commotion resolving some of the negotiations. I think his will included some method of dealing with this if you refused , but UCAT probably had some other reason for approving it."

"Two years ago was when my grandfather was talking about my entrance exam. He was being particularly hard to please. Now I know why."

"But Shinjou is different from Kazami and me. If you refuse your right to the Leviathan Road, she will likely be removed from the unit. Ooshiro Itaru and the higher ups are always extra nice when it comes to Shinjou."

Sayama frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"They don't get serious when it comes to her. Or at least it seems that way to me. She was put in the unit on the recommendation of old man Ooshiro, but it looks like Ooshiro Itaru wants to distance her from it all. Also," said Izumo. "Ooshiro Itaru seems to hate you for some reason."

"I learned that well enough from how he acted yesterday."

Sayama nodded and heard a solid sound from next to him. He looked over and found Baku had tried to remove his head from the bottle but could not. As Baku frantically spun his back legs around fruitlessly, Sayama grabbed the beast and pulled him out like a cork.

Meanwhile, he heard Izumo speaking.

"Anyway, try to stay on good terms with Shinjou Setsu. You might not understand, but normal people will let their guard down if you show some concern about them."

"Thank you very much for the advice," said Sayama with a bitter smile. He grabbed the empty bottle, placed

it in the case next to the bench, and turned his back to Izumo. “I will do my best to stay on good terms with him . Say hello to Kazami for me.”

Izumo sighed after Sayama left. He leaned against the back of the bench and called out the name Chisato.

The curtain for the women’s bath split open and Kazami’s head poked out. He watched her look back and forth.

“What are you avoiding him for? Don’t we need to show him how strict we are as current members of the Leviathan Road?”

“Yeah…but it was just too sudden.”

“What a complicated girl,” muttered Izumo as Kazami walked over and sat next to him.

Izumo frowned when he saw what she was holding.

“What are you drinking?”

"Tomato juice. I need to replenish my iron after taking a bath. I am a girl after all."

"I didn't think my Chisato was the kind of girl to discriminate based on sex…"

"C'mon. Stop hanging your head down with such a forced expression. Is it that important that I drink milk?"

"If you don't drink milk, your breasts won't grow."

"They're big enough already!"

"Really?" Izumo tilted his head, lightly grabbed at thin air with both hands, and tilted his head again. "Maybe you're right."

"I'm not sure I want you agreeing with that…" Kazami opened the pull tab, took a sip, and looked up into the sky. "But this is a difficult issue…"

"What is? Your breast size? Yeah, I suppose it is... What?"

"That isn't what I meant, you idiot. …I was referring to all of this going on."

As she said that, someone else exited from the women's bath. Izumo turned around.

"Oh, it's Ooki-sensei," he called out.

Ooki was wearing track pants and a T-shirt.

"Hi!" she called back to Izumo.

Suddenly, Kazami jabbed an elbow into Izumo's side while she drank her tomato juice.

"?" thought Izumo as he looked over at Ooki. Once he saw what she held in her hand, he whispered to Kazami.

"A soda, hm? She's gonna get fat."

"And they can dissolve bones, too. She's going to look pitiful when her teeth are falling out."

"Wh-what kind of ominous things are you two saying!?"

Ooki groaned and stopped the two of them. She then drank the soda so they could see.

"Th-this is a flavor children wouldn't understand."

"Is that so?" said Kazami with her half-lidded eyes turned toward the ground. She then added, "But I don't think you should say that while the carbonation is bringing tears to your eyes."

Chapter 22: Unforgettable Secrets

Chapter 22

“Unforgettable Secrets”

Memories can be made into words
But they do not need to be made into words
That is why our desire to know more of them never ends

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Sayama stood in the city with Shinjou Setsu as the sun set.

Sayama was wearing a suit as usual. Shinjou was wearing a shirt and brown shorts.

Sayama was using both arms to hold the paper bag from a hobby center that Shinjou should have been carrying. Baku sat on his head.

They stood before a large estate surrounded by a green fence. They were looking at the side of the estate. They could see a large lawn with pine trees, cherry trees, and garden stones. The main building beyond that was a large tile-roofed Japanese-style house.

The area around it was growing dark, but the estate was brightly lit by the light coming from the sliding doors and windows.

Shinjou looked back and forth across the 100-meter fence.

“Wow… Th-this is your house, Sayama-kun?”

“It is not my house. This is the Tamiya family’s house. They control the underside of Akigawa city and the surrounding areas. To put it simply, they are a vigilante group. They run a security company as their foundation.”

“That’s amazing.”

Sayama looked at Shinjou and lifted up the paper bag in his arms a bit.

“I was thinking of eating dinner here to apologize for today. Is that okay with you?”

Shinjou looked up at him. Finally, he bent his eyes and showed his teeth in a smile.

"Sure. I would love that."

Shinjou held out his hands. He seemed to be asking to take back his bag, but Sayama smiled bitterly.

"I decided to carry this of my own free will. And I need to show a guest proper courtesy."

"I suppose so… Thanks. I've never been in an estate like this before."

"This place can also be used for celebrations after various events. There is nothing to fear. Although, Izumo was once attacked by a selectively bred alligator after diving into the pond."

"I'll ignore that last part, but why don't you go to school from here?"

"It is my grandfather the Tamiya family is indebted to. They will not tell me much about it, but it seems they would have been destroyed if it were not for him. …But my grandfather's achievements have nothing to do with me."

"You're really strict… Do you not think of them as family?"

"It would be nice if I could. Now, the gate is this way."

Sayama pointed to the eastern end of the fence with his chin. Shinjou looked up above his head and laughed.

"What is it?"

"He copied you up on your head."

"Oh, Baku did? He seems to be gradually taking a liking to me."

"Everyone and everything around you is strange, isn't it?"

"Yes, and that causes unending troubles for a normal person like me."

"Y-yeah…" said Shinjou as he averted his gaze.

Sayama nodded just as a voice came from the estate's entrance to the east.

"…!"

They had not been able to understand it, but someone was yelling. They looked and, in the center of the eastern

fence, a large black car was stopped in front of the small wooden gate. A young man and woman were dealing with a fat elderly man in between the gate and the car.

"What is going on? Is it what you call a turf war?"

"Where did you learn that term? Anyway, this is nothing so serious. That is Tamiya Kouji and Ryouko. Those siblings are the current supporting pillars of the Tamiya family. I do not know who that man is, but just watch." Sayama watched the young man wearing a colored shirt and suit pants and the young woman wearing a blue kimono. "I am still too inexperienced to think of them as family."

The woman wearing a blue kimono stood with her back to the lights of the estate. Her narrow drooping eyes were covered by glasses and watched the black car and the elderly man standing in front of it.

His fat body was covered by a gray three-piece suit and a white scarf. He held a cigarette in his mouth.

The blue kimono-wearing woman spoke to the man in a gentle voice.

"I am glad you appear to be in good health, president."

"I don't care if you call me fat and bald, Tamiya Ryouko-san. I am here about-…"

"Yes," nodded Ryouko. She placed a hand on the hair pulled back behind her head in a bun. "One of your young members seemed to have had some late-night business with one of the companies we protect."

"Yes, that. As I said before, that is a misunderstanding, so-…"

"Unfortunately, well, the issue has already been handed over to the police." Ryouko brought her hands together in front of her waist and smiled. "Trust matters most to us. We cannot go back on this now."

"Are you stupid? I'm not talking about your convenience." The elderly man's tone gradually dropped as he glared up at Ryouko. "If you youngsters think you can get away with this using who your predecessors were-.."

"Good point," said Ryouko while still smiling. " President, how much longer is this speech going to last?"

That comment silenced the man slightly and he pulled his cigarette from his mouth.

"Damn you…"

As soon as he opened his mouth, Ryouko took action.

She took a step forward and pressed the cigarette in his hand against her chest.

"Oh, dear. That is quite hot."

With a slight sound of burning, a hole was created in the kimono. The man frantically pulled his hand back.

"Y-you idiot..." he started to say, but Ryouko's eyes narrowed further behind her glasses.

"You mustn't suddenly touch a woman's chest."

While still smiling, Ryouko raised a hand too fast to see.

That instantaneous movement came to a stop. By that time, something other than a cigarette was sticking into the elderly man's opened mouth.

It was a mass of black metal. It was a handgun.

Ryouko suddenly squeezed the trigger.

"…!"

The man let out a voiceless cry and the gun's hammer shook.

"Oh?"

終わり

Ryouko tilted her head.

She could not pull the trigger. Her slender finger had tried to attack, but the trigger stopped after moving a few millimeters. The man breathed erratically and adjusted his hips that were about to crumble beneath him. And then Ryouko spoke to her younger brother who stood next to her.

“Kouji, this thing’s broken.”

“What a pain,” said the young man in a navy blue shirt and with a crew cut. “Um, nee-san.”

“Yes, Kouji? What am I supposed to do at times like this?”

As the two siblings spoke, the elderly man slowly raised his hands. He was trying to remove the handgun from his mouth and hold Ryouko’s hands back. He calculated the timing, calmed himself with three deep breaths, and tried to take action.

At the same moment, Kouji nodded and answered his older sister’s question.

"You turn off the safety. Didn't I teach you that before ?"

"Oh, that's right, that's right. I was too quick to think it was broken," she said delightedly. She then overcame the elderly man's actions and removed the safety. "Sorry about the delay."

And she pulled the trigger. She fired six shots all at once. Repeated gunshots rang out and the man trembled.

As the final gunshot faded into the sky, the elderly man collapsed as if crouching down.

At the same time, the driver's door of the black car opened.

"D-damn you!"

The young driver charged out of the car.

The instant he reached into his pocket, an object seemed to grow from the hood of the car.

With a metallic noise, a single carving knife had stabbed into the hood.

The driver froze in place with his hand still in his pocket.

He stared at the knife before him and the person who had thrown it.

Tamiya Kouji lightly held his right hand toward the driver.

“I apologize, but our family is currently preparing a meal for some guests and therefore preparing for battle.”

As he spoke, something that glittered hung down from Kouji’s hand. It was a cooking knife with a rectangular blade.

He closed his eyelids a bit as the blade hung down between his index finger and middle finger.

“I was in the middle of chopping cabbage. If I do not continue soon, the poor thing will wilt.”

Ryouko then spoke from where she was crouched down next to the collapsed elderly man.

"Oh?" She turned toward Kouji and lightly tapped the knife blade in his hand. "Kouji, Kouji. This didn't shoot any bullets."

Smoke could be seen rising from the elderly man's mouth, but no real harm seemed to have come to him. Kouji stood next to the man who was breathing smoke.

"I put blanks in it. You can have real bullets once you learn how to use a gun."

"C'mon, Kouji. Why do you always treat your big sister like a child?"

"If you want that to change, nee-san, then learn how to use a gun. Not to mention the video player, the stove, the stereo, and the washing machine."

"I'm no good with machines that have more than two steps."

As Ryouko tapped on Kouji's knee, the knife fell from his hand.

"Ah," said the siblings.

"Ahhh!" cried the driver.

The knife stabbed down just above the elderly man's head.

A clear sound rang out.

The rectangular blade stabbed about five centimeters into the asphalt and stopped while digging shallowly into the man's hair.

The driver frantically ran around the car. As the three of them watched on, the elderly man lay on his back with his limbs sprawled out. His eyes were opened wide and both corners of his smoke-spewing mouth were lifted up.

"How strange. He somehow looks quite satisfied," commented Ryouko as she stroked the handle of the knife sticking into the ground.

"I-idiot!"

The driver frantically tried to help the elderly man up, but Ryouko looked up at him and smiled.

"Idiot?"

"Oh, um. No. I meant… I was saying I'm an idiot. Sorry."

"I see… but you shouldn't point out that kind of thing about yourself."

"Nee-san, you're just agreeing that he is an idiot."

"Am I?"

Ryouko pulled a small black device from her pocket. It was a simple single-button camera.

She took a few pictures of the elderly man without using the flash and the smile in the eyes behind her glasses changed to a satisfied one.

"At any rate, you can leave now."

Without saying anything, the driver put the elderly man in the backseat. Meanwhile, Kouji wordlessly pulled the knife out of the car's hood and suddenly looked to the side.

"Oh, young master," he said with a bow.

Ryouko turned around upon hearing Kouji's voice and the car quickly drove away.

As the sound of exhaust grew more distant, two figures stood before them.

One was a boy wearing a suit and holding a brown paper bag. The other was wearing a shirt and shorts. The second figure folded his hands in front of his waist with a stiff smile.

The suit-wearing boy smiled and said, "I am glad to see you have not changed. We are here for dinner."

After entering the Tamiya household, Shinjou ended up helping prepare dinner.

Everything Shinjou saw there left his mouth hanging open. All he had seen so far was the sprawling entranceway, the hallway five people could walk abreast through, and the kitchen which had two sinks. He also saw men and women servants who accomplished everything with no wasted movements.

Shinjou was short and he greeted those tall people with a smile before helping in the kitchen.

Sayama was in the living room next to the kitchen. Shinjou could see his back across the wide hallway where he was sitting on a cushion and reading a newspaper.

Shinjou peeled potatoes in between Kouji and Ryouko who had changed into an orange kimono.

Kouji wore an apron to Shinjou's left. The movements of his hands were quick, efficient, and highly varied. As Shinjou watched, he sliced the vegetables, fish, and other meat the servants brought him, washed them in the sink, and moved on to his next action.

The repeated sounds of the knife striking the chopping board, the sounds of the ingredient being sliced, and the sounds of the sink seemed to continue without end.

To Shinjou's right, Ryouko had taken up her position in front of a pot sitting over a weak flame. She was not doing anything, but…

"Okay, nee-san. Move out of the way. The fish is burning."

"Kouji, you're treating me like I'm in the way again. The older sister is more important."

"Yes, you are quite important. But you're still in the way."

"You're acting like the young master now, Kouji."

"I am still more decisive," called Sayama from the living room.

"Kouji, where are Seizou and the others?"

"They went to Atami for the neighborhood association trip. He said he was looking forward to the Atagawa Tropical & Alligator Garden and for some reason brought a shotgun with him."

"What an airheaded family," Shinjou muttered to himself as he peeled the potato before his eyes.

Ryouko restlessly looked like she wanted to help.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Nee-san, you can focus on what's right in front of you ."

"Watching something boil is boring."

"Yes, yes," nodded Kouji. "But everyone says it tastes better when you cook it."

"Really?"

Ryouko smiled in Shinjou's direction and he tried to avoid commenting on that.

"…Are things always like this here?"

"Yes. The young master has not been around recently, but we have been enjoying ourselves well enough."

Shinjou nodded and realized Ryouko's tone of voice was different when speaking to him than it was when speaking to Kouji or Sayama.

Shinjou nodded even deeper for that reason and others .

"What kind of person is Sayama-kun?" he asked.

Kouji's hands stopped when he heard that question. He stared forward with a serious expression.

"The young master is the type of person who will undoubtedly accomplish something great. I have no proof of it, but I have no doubts."

"Wh-what do you…?"

"Setsu-kun, feel free to back away. Kouji is a bit right-wing when it comes to the young master."

Ryouko held Shinjou's shoulders from behind while saying this, so Shinjou was unsure how to respond. Ryouko then peered over his shoulder at him. Her eyes were gently bent in a smile behind the glasses.

"What kind of person are you, Setsu-kun?"

"Um…"

Shinjou's hands holding the potato and the knife stopped moving.

At that time, Shinjou realized Ryouko's gaze was stopped on the fingers of his right hand.

As Ryouko looked at that completely bare right hand, she suddenly let go of Shinjou's shoulders.

"Sorry. I should not keep you from your work."

"R-right."

Shinjou began peeling the potato once more. He heard the pot to the left spewing steam and Kouji left the kitchen.

Shinjou was now alone with Ryouko.

He looked over and saw Ryouko was staring at the pot with a smile.

"Cooking is love~," she muttered as if humming.

From the look in her eyes, it seemed she truly meant those words. Shinjou decided it would be wrong to interrupt her work if she was that into it, but he then realized he had not answered Ryouko's previous question. He spoke while continuing to peel potatoes.

"I…don't know that much about myself. I have no memories before about the age of 6."

"Is that so? But you will be fine here. They might have their memories, but a lot of people here have no ID."

"I-I see…"

"Hee hee," laughed Ryouko. "But it is not often that the young master holds an interest in another person."

Shinjou listened to Ryouko's voice. She spoke so quietly only the two of them could hear it.

"He seems interested in you and your sister."

"Eh?" replied Shinjou while blushing.

Ryouko smiled bitterly while still watching the pot.

"I think it is a good thing. But it seems he really was traumatized when it comes to women…"

"What do you mean traumatized?"

"Well," said Ryouko casually. "I slept with him a long time ago."

Shinjou's hands stopped moving. He could feel sweat appearing all over his body.

"U-um…uh…"

"Hm? …You shouldn't stop working."

Shinjou began peeling the potato once more. However, he could not bring much strength into his hands and had to focus on digging an eye from the potato.

Ryouko gave a bitter smile while watching his small motions.

"Don't worry about it. Don't worry about it. It was a spur of the moment kind of thing. And it happened 10 years ago."

"But 10 years ago would mean…"

"I was young back then. I am still quite young now, though."

Ryouko spoke that last sentence with more intensity as she continued to watch the pot. She suddenly stirred the contents of the pot with a pair of cooking chopsticks. Steam rose and the scent of both soy sauce and sugar came with it.

"I had fallen for the young master's father. But his father died during the relief operations for that great Kansai earthquake. Then his mother took him and…" She nodded. "At that time, his grandfather was devoting all his time to work, so the young master seemed depressed. And so…well, you get the picture."

"Was Sayama-kun really depressed?"

"He had a bit of a backlash. He was very attached to his mother after his father died, but his mother would often tell him she hoped he would be able to do something one day. But that was not a promise. I think it was just a parent's hopes for her child. But…" Ryouko trailed off and paused before continuing. "The room he stayed in with his mother is still left unopened."

"…"

"But the young master really is a boy. He tried to take responsibility with me. But he is smart, so he realized something."

"What was that?"

"He realized that I did not want that."

"So…"

"I think he thought no one was expecting anything of him. And that was why he always wanted to be able to do something someday."

And…

"Am I talking too much?"

After thinking for a moment, Shinjou nodded, but he spoke with his head hanging down.

"Sayama-kun only speaks about himself like a stranger."

"Do you want to know about him?"

"Yes…"

"I see," was all Ryouko said. Her shoulders relaxed and she continued. "I would love for someone like that to be by his side. Someone who hopes for something from him."

"…"

"He left to live in the dorms and I became the head of the Tamiya family. Since then, he has managed to speak with me again…and now he has brought a friend like you, Setsu-kun. However…"

Ryouko faced Shinjou while continuing to stir the pot with the chopsticks. Her smile was thin and could be seen in her eyes.

Her lips thinly covered in lipstick opened and she spoke.

"Listen. I am his ally, but I do not intend to pressure you into anything. And if he attacks you, it may have been my fault that he turned in that direction, so complain to me rather than him. If possible, it would be best if he attacked your sister instead."

"What do you mean it would be best!? Also, Sayama-kun and I are normal friends!"

"I see. So you are normal friends." Ryouko gave a deep nod and a smile returned to her face. "So having your friend pull on your penis in the bath is normal. Friendship has made some amazing advancements."

"S-Sayama-kun! What are you telling people!?"

Shinjou heard a newspaper folding in the living room.

"I only told the truth. I asked them to hold a feast so that I could apologize for angering you."

Shinjou's shoulder's drooped and he let out a deep sigh.

The next thing he knew, strength had returned to his hands.

The Kinugasa Library was filled with the chirping of a bird as Siegfried placed down a phone receiver.

"So the transport plane carrying Gram has taken off," he muttered to himself.

At that time, a knock came at the library door, it opened, and a single figure entered. It was Ooki who was wearing a white track suit. Siegfried tilted his head.

"Are you locking up again, Ooki-sensei? We have janitors for that."

"There is still so much about this school I can't get used to." Ooki smiled with a ring of keys in hand. "Have you seen Brunhild-san?"

"Yes. She said she had some business to take care of and left. She said she will return tomorrow morning."

"I see… It seems she hasn't submitted her dorm registration for next term yet. I just locked up upstairs, but the art room was sitting open." She tilted her head. " Her painting was finished. The forest had a cabin, four people, and a bird."

"I see."

Siegfried looked down at the cardboard box on the counter. Ooki followed his gaze and walked over to the box.

"Oh, it's a Japanese tit."

"Hm? Do you know a lot about birds?"

"Yes. There are tons of trees back home, so I know a lot!" Ooki clicked her tongue several times, held a hand out toward the bird, and narrowed her eyes. "You were

taking care of this bird all last night, weren't you? That's why you were in the music room in the morning."

"Oh?" Siegfried's eyebrows raised. "You noticed? But you have only been here for a short time."

"Yes. I heard it was two years ago, before I arrived at the school, that you started going to the music room every weekend and day off." Ooki closed her eyes and smiled as she spoke quietly. "Do you have some reason? Is there someone you want to hear that organ music?"

Two figures stood before the gate leading into the Tamiya household.

It was Ryouko and Kouji who had removed his apron. They were watching Sayama and Shinjou leave.

"They're gone. …Kouji, you need to make sure people stick around longer."

"Nee-san, you're the one that is bad at keeping people around. Young people these days aren't interested in Chogokin models."

"And I just got it from a customer, too. That 'Giant Combining God Chuck and Norris' is really rare. But," continued Ryouko as she smiled and brought a hand to her cheek. "Setsu-kun seemed to be getting along well with the young master."

"Just to be clear, nee-san, Setsu-kun is a guy."

"What's wrong with that? He has a sister too, remember? The young master should be plenty satisfied with that."

"Satisfied with what? From what I could see, Setsu-kun and his sister Sadame-kun are normal."

"You're so scary when you look at me from the side like that. You need to learn from your sister how to be gentler."

Kouji sighed.

"Fine, fine." He patted his sister's shoulder. "But I saw a suspicious look on your face when you looked at Setsu-kun's right hand. What was that about?"

"Oh… I have a bit of a connection to someone named Shinjou… It's someone else, though. That person is dead,

so I won't say anything. …Anyway, anyway." Ryouko tilted her head and held up her right hand. "Setsu-kun's finger had a slight mark from where he had been wearing a ring." The smile had disappeared from Ryouko's face. "It wouldn't be that odd for him to wear it to be fashionable, but if not, isn't it weird that he wasn't wearing it? …I wonder why that is?"

Despite her question, Ryouko's slight smile returned and she looked straight at her younger brother.

"Well, I'm sure the young master will do something."

The moon rose in the night sky.

Its pale light lit the mountains and a single shadow flew above them.

This object with large wings and a thick body was a transport plane with four engines.

The aircraft bathed in the moonlight as it flew high, high above the forest-covered countryside. The noise reverberated far above and descended from the sky like a stain.

The aircraft appeared to cross over the moon.

And in that moment, a white line stretched up from below.

Even as the line grew blurred, it continued on diagonally upwards, pierced through the aircraft, and seemed to split the moon in two.

It took five seconds.

After that, a crimson flower bud appeared in the sky.

And a great noise descended.

It was a muffled yet loud noise.

It was the sound of an explosion at high altitude.

That crimson bud bloomed into a crimson flower, but the flower petals quickly shriveled up and grew black.

The two colors of crimson and black scattered in multiple forms and dropped while trailing the color black. They fell down and down, they scattered, they spun, they slipped, and they tumbled through the sky and into the depths of the shadows.

It fell. It fell further. And even as it fell into the dark forest spreading out below, the moonlight covered it all.

It had fallen.

Chapter 23: Windy, Moon-Filled Sky

Chapter 23

“Windy, Moon-Filled Sky”

Below the moon
And amid the wind
What exists along with the ground there?

Below the moon

And amid the wind

What exists along with the ground there?

Sayama and Shinjou walked through the school.

They walked along the gravel beside the line of trees behind the second year general school building. They were on their way to their student dorm.

As the moonlight poured down on him, Sayama held a paper bag and had Baku sitting on his head. Shinjou smiled empty-handed next to him.

"This may sound self-important, but my opinion of you has improved a bit, Sayama-kun."

"Has it?"

"Yes. In my discussion with Ryouko-san, I learned you are surprisingly timid."

"Why did that improve your opinion of me?" asked Sayama with a bitter smile.

Shinjou replied to that bitter smile. His own smile disappeared, but his expression was still relaxed.

"You have been thinking about something all this time , haven't you? You have been constantly thinking about something important to you that you can't tell me about. The reason you can't make up your mind right away despite how important it is for you must be because it involves a connection with some other person. Am I right ?" He took a breath. "When people grow timid when thinking about some other person, it is because they want to be with that person."

One of the sets of footsteps stopped.

It was Sayama's. He had stopped walking.

After taking two steps ahead, Shinjou turned around while bathing in the moonlight. Their eyes met. As Sayama received Shinjou's gaze, he narrowed his eyes a bit and opened his mouth. He tried to say something in response.

"…"

But only silence fell to the ground from his mouth.

He hung his head down and nodded once. Sayama then looked back up. He looked back at Shinjou while making sure not to knock Baku from his head.

"You and your sister are interesting people. You know how to always hit me where it hurts and then you make me say what exactly it was that hurt."

"Really…?"

"Yes, really. You managed to get right to the point I was most conflicted about."

"What are you conflicted about, Sayama-kun?"

Sayama opened his mouth once more and finally gave an answer.

"I am conflicted because it seems giving up on trying to get serious would be for the best."

"…Eh?"

"Everyone around me is saying I should just quit. I have no confidence in myself. The world I live in now is

small, but it provides plenty of stimulation. Also…" He nodded. "If I am to get serious, I want someone to act as my mirror image. I want someone who is the opposite of me. …But that would be inviting that person into danger. In that case," said Sayama. "Giving up would leave no problems. Other than the ones inside me."

"I see," said Shinjou with a nod.

But Shinjou lightly kicked the ground. He kicked away some of the white gravel making up the ground and turned toward Sayama once more. Shinjou's eyebrows were straight, his gaze was straight, and he simply opened his mouth to ask a question.

"Are you…okay with that?"

He asked a question, but he did not try to get an answer.

He lightly embraced his own body and asked another question.

"Hey. About what you said before… Who is it you are thinking about?"

"Well…"

"Is it your mother who wanted you to do something one day? Is it Ryouko-san who cared for you even if for a short time? Or is it the person you do not want to invite into danger? The person who is your opposite…"

Shinjou opened his mouth and began to speak a certain name.

But an electronic tone cut in between the two of them.

It came from the cell phone in Sayama's pocket. The electronic whistle sounded at set intervals as it called for him.

Shinjou and Sayama exchanged a glance.

Shinjou then nodded and approached Sayama. Once he reached arm length, he held out his hands.

Shinjou took the large bag from Sayama.

With his hands free, Sayama took the black cell phone from his pocket and held it to his ear.

"It is me."

A voice came from the phone and entered Sayama's ear.

It was a female voice he had never heard before. The voice uttered the following words.

"Hello, Sayama-sama. I am Sibyl, the communications officer for Japanese UCAT's Team Leviathan." After her introduction, the woman naming herself Sibyl said, "I would like to speak with you for a moment. Is that okay?"

"Of course," said Sayama as he glanced toward Shinjou and then looked up into the sky. "What is it you need?"

"Tes. I would like either an acceptance or denial of an emergency deployment request," said Sibyl. "Today at 18 :37, contact was lost with the transport plane transporting the holy sword Gram as it flew over Mount Hyono on the eastern edge of the Chugoku Mountains. At 18:59, an expansive concept space was detected near

Mount Hyono. No traces or wreckage of the plane have been found in the real world. It has likely been brought into the concept space."

Sayama looked at his watch. It was 7:12 PM.

"What progress has been made in responding to this?"

"Tes. A letter claiming responsibility along with a commemorative photograph was received from 1st-Gear's City faction. UCAT at IAI HQ is currently engaging a 1st-Gear advance unit while searching for the holy sword Gram. Team Leviathan's supervisor, Ooshiro Itaru, has announced this will be used to truly begin the Leviathan Road."

"I see. Then…is there anything I can do?"

"You have yet to accept the negotiation rights for the Leviathan Road. However, it has been determined that the issues with 1st-Gear will be decided in this battle. If you do not take part, we will view you as having abandoned your negotiation rights."

"…"

"Please come to Akigawa City Central Park by 19:30. We will send a helicopter to pick you up."

"And if I do not go?"

"We will cut off all connections with you, Sayama-sama."

Sibyl then said the same thing she had said at the beginning of the conversation.

"Is that okay?"

"I cannot say Testament quite yet," replied Sayama.

"Tes. A testament or contract is a great promise made by a master with a sword.[2] It is a word used when you are aware of the power you hold and wish to confirm to the world who you are. You do not have much time, but I pray you can make your decision with no regrets. Goodbye."

The call came to an end.

Sayama moved the cell phone from his ear and sighed.

He looked up at the school building that was colored a dark blue by the night. He then looked up into the night sky.

Baku fell from his head and to his shoulder and then looked up just as he was doing. They looked up into the sky where the moon floated.

I need to decide, thought Sayama.

The moon shone white in the night sky and the stars and wind filled everything else.

Below all that, dark blue rectangular school buildings cut off the sky to the left and right.

Only a small section of the sky was visible from here.

"…"

If he lowered his gaze just a bit, he would see the emergency staircase on the side of the second year general school building.

Sayama thought as he looked down at that shadow cutting off the sky and at the small emergency staircase landing sticking out from it.

He wondered if the sky would look larger from that staircase.

…It would not change.

He would only be changing his location as he looked at it. He would not be leaving the boundaries of the school building.

In the end, he had never chosen anything more than that.

"Is that…?"

Was that the answer to it all? He had been unable to hold any confidence or pride in his own actions and he had been unable to lead anyone deeply into the battlefield. And that was why he had never been able to get serious. He had settled for a small place.

That was what he had been doing all this time.

I really am timid, thought Sayama.

However, that would solve everything. It was a small world and he could not afford to lose it.

That was the correct way of thinking.

And he was wrong.

That was all there was to it.

He had to decide. If he took Shinjou's bag once more and returned to the dorm room with him, it would all be over.

Sayama hung his head down and looked to the ground .

And as he did, he realized something.

He realized his thinking was immature.

What had sent Sayama's thoughts racing was down at his feet. His gaze that had fallen in resignation and what he saw there was the ground trapped between two school buildings. Or so it should have been. However…

"That is not what this is…"

Below his eyes and atop the gravel was something connected to the sky and the light that he had looked up at before. Something closely connected to that boxed off world of the heavens was falling at his feet.

It was a shadow.

"…"

The pale light of the moon sent his shadow atop the gravel.

And the surrounding school buildings also struck the ground with their own shadows at heights to match.

From here, the sky was boxed off.

But it was not closed off. It was connected to the ground at his feet.

"…"

Sayama looked back up into the heavens. He looked into that sky filled with pale light.

And he stepped on the ground at his feet. He stepped on that ground that was covered in shadows because it was connected to the sky.

There was light above his head and shadows below his feet.

The shadows of the night were nothing other than the opposite of the light of the night.

And as he began to close his eyes, he felt something else that connected the sky to the earth.

The wind.

It came suddenly.

"…Kh!"

He heard a roar and felt the cold air striking him.

That movement of air surrounded him. He heard it brushing across his ears.

This powerful and solid wind did not come from the west, the east, the south, or even the north.

It came from above.

“!”

This wind blew by at a high altitude, struck the wall of the school building, and dropped down.

He had no idea where this wind came from, but it danced around them and he heard a slight voice.

“Kyah!”

That light voice of surprise led Sayama to reach out a hand.

He reached out toward Shinjou who held his paper bag. Sayama pulled that body toward him and embraced him to protect him from the wind.

As the wind danced and dispersed, Sayama felt slender shoulders and a thin back. He felt Shinjou's body temperature in his arms and the word "warm" came to his mind.

Shinjou suddenly went limp in his arms. The paper bag in Shinjou's arms slipped and fell.

The gravel crunched as the bag fell. Shinjou sank into his arms and into his chest.

The wind died down and disappeared. A voice took its place.

"You're going to decide…aren't you?"

Sayama realized Shinjou was looking up at him. Shinjou's hair was bound, but the wind had wrapped a few strands around Sayama's arms. Shinjou's black eyes stared directly at him.

Shinjou opened his mouth and reworded his previous statement.

"You're on your way to decide, aren't you?"

As Shinjou asked, his face shined in the moonlight. His face looked a pale white and his eyes looked blue.

Sayama met Shinjou's gaze. He nodded and opened his mouth.

"Shinjou-kun," he said. He spoke to the person who was as close to him as anyone ever had been. "I…" He hesitated. "I will likely get someone else involved with what I do."

"Is that what has bothered you? Is that what you have been afraid of?"

Sayama nodded.

"Yes. I have been thinking about that. This person is important to me, but I am not sure they can handle the danger."

"Sayama-kun, what do you think of this person?"

"They are important to me. As important as I am to myself."

"I see," said Shinjou with a sigh. He closed his eyes slightly and said, "Sayama-kun…You act like an evil person, but you are not."

"Then what am I?"

"Well," said Shinjou with a small nod.

The ends of his eyebrows lowered, but a smile could be seen on his lips.

His eyes narrowed and he raised his head to look Sayama in the eye.

"You are the villain. You merely play the role of the evil person." He took a breath. "If you were a truly evil person, you would not hesitate to get others involved. But you do not do that." He moved his lips once and then continued. "You are a welcome person to have around, Sayama-kun." He nodded. "And I am sure the person you care so much for has realized that. I think that is why they tried to stop you. …But it is okay if you are a bit selfish when it comes to that person. Not as a villain, but as yourself."

"I see," said Sayama with a nod.

He removed his arms and released Shinjou.

Shinjou smiled bitterly while still lightly embracing his own body.

“C’mon… I am a boy, you know?”

“So am I.”

Shinjou’s shoulders drooped when he heard that.

“Which one did you want just now?”

“Some questions are best left unanswered, Shinjou-kun.” Sayama smiled and turned his back on Shinjou. “I will be going. And I will try to return as soon as I can.”

“Can I ask where you’re going?”

“Would you accept ‘where I must go’ as an answer?”

“Yes,” said Shinjou. He lightly raised a hand. “Do your best.”

Sayama nodded and ran off with Baku on his shoulder . Even as he left the school, he continued stepping on his own shadow.

Brunhild heard a series of footsteps through the darkness.

Her vision was closed off. All she could hear was a group of footsteps moving at a set tempo.

Her butt and legs felt the dampness of mossy dirt, her back felt the hardness of a cedar tree trunk, her arms felt the weight of a metal scythe's blade and handle, and her cheeks felt a soft, damp sensation.

"…"

She opened her eyes and saw a color of darkness different from that of the inside of her eyelids.

She quickly grew accustomed to this new darkness.

She was in a forest. Trees made disorderly lines along a slope. She sat on a low cliff atop the slope.

She had been napping while leaning against a tree.

"You woke me, didn't you?"

A small black form stood next to her face.

It was a black cat. Its eyes alone shined yellow in the darkness. They informed her of the cat's location and expression.

"Brunhild, everyone has begun to move."

She sat up and looked down. She looked down to the forest on the shallow slope a few meters below. Many, many dark figures were walking through that forest. They were all headed in the same direction: east.

Some of them had human forms. Some did not. Some had wings, some looked human but were too large to be, and some looked like dragons.

"This…isn't everyone. The others are gathering with the vanguard that went in first."

"Oh, I didn't know that… So have they found Gram?"

"It apparently fell to the east inside the concept space that Venerable Hagen set up. As did the mechanism for making it invisible. All of it was read in while the concept space was being created."

"I see," said the cat as it watched Brunhild sit all the way up and wrap her arms around her knees.

"A concept analysis is being carried out based on the records created from Venerable Hagen reading in the transport plane. Once that is complete, we should know what concepts are being used to hide Gram. I just hope the search team has not passed it by already."

"So everyone is really motivated, but they're all just heading randomly in a general direction?"

"Don't say it like that. There is nothing wrong with advancing an army as long as it lets us acquire Gram." Brunhild nodded. "We will eliminate UCAT when they arrive. I assume Fafner and the others have already begun fighting."

"Yes, I saw that. …He seemed really excited."

Brunhild sighed. She watched everyone marching by below and then looked up into the sky.

She saw the moon there. She saw the light there.

“That light is in the way,” she muttered.

Having that light there during the night created shadows that were different from darkness and made it more difficult to know one’s surroundings.

“Darkness should be nothing more than darkness.”

“I wonder if Siegfried will come,” said the black cat suddenly.

“It doesn’t matter. We have already done what we had to do,” said Brunhild as she embraced Requiem Sense in her arms.

She looked up at the moonlight, but was unable to bring an end to that light.

Sayama ran below the moonlight.

His footsteps reverberated throughout Akigawa City Central Park located on the southern end of Takaakita Academy's grounds. That central park was located on Itsukaichi Road which connected the academy grounds with the outside world. The park also contained a track-and-field stadium.

If a helicopter was landing, it would be there.

Sayama ran through the park which was surrounded by trees, kicked off the red brick ground, and made his way to the stadium.

He could see his footing thanks to the moonlight and the outdoor lighting. His footsteps and breathing expressed all of his actions.

He hurried.

His watch said it was 7:28 PM. He was already at his destination, so running any further would be pointless.

And yet he hurried.

He arrived at the stadium's seats. He made his way out from the shadows of the trees, ran between the lines of seats, and leaped onto the track with a single footstep.

He landed with a soft sound and found himself surrounded by red clay and white lines. In the center was a grassy opening.

I made it, thought Sayama.

And…

"I have to go," he muttered before walking instead of running.

He walked toward the center of the stadium.

Strength entered his right arm. Pain entered his left. But…

…I can move it.

That was good enough. He used both his hands freely for the first time in a while. Sayama placed Baku in his vest's breast pocket and grabbed his coat collar with both hands while continuing to walk.

After forcefully raising his hands he swung them to the left and right. The material of the sleeves stretched and created a sound similar to striking a piece of paper.

After fixing his disheveled clothing and creating that clear noise, he lowered his arms to his sides.

Sayama's leather shoes created loud footsteps as he walked through the gentle wind. He headed for the center of the stadium. He headed for the very center which was lit up in four directions by outdoor lights.

Sayama looked at his destination. A single person stood there.

It was a tall old man. He had a bald head and a white beard. He wore his usual black vest, black trousers, and a black coat.

Sayama spoke as he approached that man whose black clothing was fluttering in the wind.

"Good evening, Sorcerer Siegfried Zonburg."

Siegfried nodded as his name was called.

And he looked up into the sky. Sayama followed his gaze up.

A shadow could be seen flying toward them in the white moon floating in the heavens.

That dark, long, and narrow form was the shadow of a helicopter.

Wind blew down from above and an intermittent noise reverberated throughout the stadium.

The wind and noise danced about, tore up the surrounding grass, and caused that grass to fly about like horizontal rain.

Amid that, Siegfried opened his mouth. He spoke in a clear tone.

“Welcome to the place you have chosen, Sayama Mikoto.”

Chapter 24: Entrance to the Dance

Chapter 24

“Entrance to the Dance”

Begin moving ever so slowly
And you will surely see
The acceleration leading to the end

Begin moving ever so slowly

And you will surely see

The acceleration leading to the end

Sayama and Siegfried travelled to the western side of Japan.

The helicopter took them to IAI's Tokyo branch. A plane took them from there to IAI's central branch in Nagoya. They then took another helicopter to the Chugoku Mountains. They were headed for a base that had been constructed on the southern side of Mount Hyono.

Despite the roar of the helicopter, the roar of the wind, and the chill of the air, Sayama slept in the flight jacket he had been given.

And he saw the past.

"…"

In his sleep, he saw a quiet wooden room.

He recognized the room. It was the small room in 1st-Gear where the old man named Regin had lived.

It was dark within and the slate in the fireplace was emitting a slight crimson light.

In that pale, gentle light, two men faced each other.

The first was the old man whose room it was. Regin wore green clothes.

The other was a tall young man. Siegfried wore long, black clothes.

While pacing to and from the fireplace, Regin explained 1st-Gear's state to Siegfried. Siegfried nodded in understanding at the old man's words and Sayama could understand them from the images they brought to his mind.

In 1st-Gear, the king had feared the Concept War and therefore mass produced mechanical dragons for defense .

1st-Gear had extracted the world's Concept Core for defense.

Most of the concepts within the Concept Core that related to writing had been placed in a weapons laboratory for research purposes. The concepts related to the construction of the world had been placed below the royal palace in order to manipulate the world.

And in case another Gear tried to invade, the holy sword Gram had been created to seal the Concept Core. Regin told all of this to Siegfried.

However, Regin stopped pacing, looked down, and closed his eyes.

"Even if we create an army, 1st-Gear does not have the manpower needed to defeat the other Gears."

"How very wise. Unlike us."

They both grinned bitterly at that.

But both of their bitter smiles came to an end.

Regin straightened his stance and faced Siegfried. He raised his head and looked up at the young man. No smile of any kind could be seen on his face.

"Princess Gutrune explained 1st-Gear's structure to you, right?"

"Yes. It is an inward-facing world surrounded by a dome-shaped space."

"Our king wishes to use 1st-Gear's inward-facing concept to seal it off. He has said he wishes to take a nonaggression policy and then negotiate with the Gears remaining at the time of destruction, but I am doubtful that is what he truly intends to do."

"Do you have any proof?"

"The holy sword Gram was supposed to be presented to him tonight at the festival, but he said it was unnecessary and had it sealed below the palace. He also said we would begin an absolute defense. I want to go see what he meant by that," said Regin. "It would be simple for him to set our concepts so the Gear is closed off and the gates can never be opened again. He has the Concept Core after all. I want to see whether I am

overthinking this, so I will check during the festival tonight when the king's aides have either returned to their territories or are asleep."

"If this is nothing but a baseless suspicion of yours, everything will be fine. But what will you do if the king is truly planning to do that?"

"I will have the princess take command."

Seigfried's expression changed when he heard that. It changed from tense to harsh.

Regin continued to speak as he stared directly at that expression.

"The princess has agreed. The others may call me a traitor, though."

"Is this necessary?"

"Yes. And once this is all over…I will die without leaving any records of my actions with a storyteller. I will take all of the malice onto myself."

"…"

"Don't give me that look, youth from another world."

"I was not giving you a look."

Regin smiled a bit. And with that smile, he raised his head.

"The princess said she would make an agreement with your Gear if she ends up in a position of power. …She must really like the music you taught her to play on the keyboard." He nodded. "Will you come with me? If the king is not planning to defend this Gear but is instead planning to shut the gates and be destroyed at the time of destruction, I will open the path to the underground concept facility and join with Fafnir, the mechanical dragon meant to guard the royal palace, so that I might take the Concept Core. You take Gram from the storage area behind the palace it is sealed in and head underground. If we are together, we have a better chance of overpowering him."

"What about Gutrune and the others?"

"Let them sleep. This might result in betrayal. During the festival tonight, all the unneeded politicians will

return to their homes. Imagine if the princess snuck into the palace in the middle of the night during that. It could not be passed off as a joke."

Siegfried frowned and sighed.

"Regin, did you give no thought to the possibility of me betraying you? If I stole Gram and the Concept Core and then ran off, I could destroy this world."

"If you try that, I will unite with Fafnir. Do you think you can handle that?"

"I have already defeated one mechanical dragon. I am the strongest sorcerer in my world."

"I see," said Regin. However, he still patted Siegfried's shoulder. This produced two or three dry noises. "But Nein would never grow so fond of someone who would do that. That girl is the only surviving member of the long-lived race in this Gear. She is quite timid. She even kept some distance from the princess who took her in."

Regin looked up above the fireplace. He looked at the birdcage covered by a knit cloth.

As he stared at it, his expression softened and he finally spoke.

"I hope this is all a misunderstanding on my part and nothing happens."

His voice seemed to grow more distant.

Sayama felt his vision grow dark.

He awoke from the past. That old memory disappeared and the roar of a helicopter and the wind replaced it.

When he opened his eyes, Sayama saw the dark backseat of the helicopter and its ceiling.

The brisk air blowing by as well as the vibration and roaring engine told him they were still in flight.

Siegfried sat to his right. He was lifting up his collar and checking inside his coat. He seemed to be organizing the inner pocket.

Sayama checked his watch and saw it was almost 9:00 PM. The old man named Yonkichi who was navigating from the copilot seat turned around. He was the younger brother of Nijun who Sayama had seen in the medical room. His long black hair waved in the wind.

“Listen. We are about to enter the Osaka region,” he explained in a voice almost drowned out by the wind.

Sayama looked out the window.

He saw beads of light in the distance ahead. Those lights extending in an arch to port were the lights along the coast of Osaka Bay extending from Kobe to Osaka and off into the Sakai region.

Something similar to dark waves were visible directly below. Those waves were the mountains and forests illuminated by the moonlight. The speed of the helicopter caused the ground below to undulate like waves.

Sayama called on his geographical knowledge and speculated they were in the Ikoma Mountains.

He nodded. And as he did, the area below suddenly opened up. The forest came to an end and an open plain became visible.

Immediately afterwards, Sayama saw a large shadow in the sky to the side of the helicopter.

"…!?"

It was a huge shadow. It spread out across his entire vision like a wall. What he could see in the moonlight was a structure that was easily a kilometer wide. He looked up into the sky and the towering wall continued upwards. He could not see the top.

…I recognize this.

"Babel!?"

As Sayama pressed up against the window, he heard a voice from the seat to his right.

"Do not be ridiculous. Babel exists within a concept space. You should not be able to see it."

Sayama looked back out the window.

It was gone.

The giant tower he had seen so clearly a moment before had disappeared.

Sayama moved from the window in blank surprise. He heard Siegfried speaking behind him.

"Did your string vibration approach that concept space's by coincidence? Or did Baku show it to you?"

It was impossible to say. Sayama looked down again and the grassy plain from before had disappeared.

He wondered how much of it had been real. And…

…What even is "real" anyway?

As he thought, the lights of Sakai flowed by below them. Yonkichi spoke from the copilot seat.

"Listen. We will arrive in the danger zone in another five minutes."

Brunhild sat on the edge of the cliff in the forest. She watched a light descend in the sky.

It was about five kilometers away. That light came from a manmade aircraft and it sank into the mountain range.

The wind blew in and a distant roar that sounded like waves reached her.

The light disappeared beyond the mountain range.

A small figure stood up next to where she sat. It was a black cat. He tilted his head.

“They sure are busy. Another one landed about ten minutes ago.”

“But I don’t think any more are coming. The sky is still .”

“Should we meet up with Fafner and the others?”

“Yes,” said Brunhild as she stood up.

As she did, she heard several shouts beyond the mountain to their backs.

Those shouts were followed by metal striking metal and gunfire.

Those sounds did not stop.

Brunhild's eyes narrowed as she listened to those shouts and trembling noises.

"Those voices are ours. …We are pushing through."

"Well, we are used to this area."

The cat nodded and Brunhild began to walk. They walked toward the voices and noises.

But after taking a few steps, she looked over her shoulder. She turned toward where that light had descended.

She narrowed her eyes and a quiet voice escaped her lips.

"…Don't come."

Her begging voice was swallowed up by the wind and the sounds of gunfire carried by it.

The UCAT base was set up in a mountain campground .

Two helicopter landing areas had been created by using lights for markers in an open area that was messy due to it being the off season. A tent for containers and a tent for personnel had been set up at the mountainside entrance.

The artificial lights set up around the base shined white and the area outside that was wrapped in darkness . The helicopter rotors created an undulating wind and the intermittent noise of the air being chopped.

Sayama and Siegfried stood in the brightly lit space in front of the tent.

Sayama was no longer wearing his suit. He had changed into a UCAT anti-Gear combat uniform he had been given.

It was made up of a white body suit and thick, black tights. White shorts and a coat were worn over that. Its

design was similar to the outfits of Izumo and Kazami at the Imperial Palace and Shinjou in the forest the night before last.

As Baku sat on Sayama's head, a small figure stepped out of the tent.

It was Chao. She demanded that the old man behind her explain the equipment.

He was an old man with short, white hair and a white coat. He had the same atmosphere about him as Nijun and Yonkichi. His narrow eyes bent.

"Hello, Sayama-sama. My name is Mitsuaki. How does your new outfit feel?"

"Not bad. It seems a little light, but that is necessary for marching."

"It has been developed over 60 years."

The plates, pads, and small bits of printed text placed at various points along it were made to display defensive power under most concepts.

"Did you not think about camouflaging it for covert operations? It seems to me white only makes you a target at night."

"Tes. In the other Gears, there are a lot of people who do not see us by color. The uniform has philosopher's stone camouflage that uses the concept of 'difficult for opponents to see'. Any pattern such as camouflage that hides its individuality risks changing the 'meaning' of the uniform or the one wearing it while under certain concepts."

He went on to explain that a unit testing camouflaged equipment had once fused with the forest floor and disappeared.

"So it is like modern armor."

"Tes. To ensure your vision, the head is left exposed, but it is covered by a defensive…I suppose you call it a field. No physical strike will break through it unless it has a very large amount of momentum or was conceptually changed to something else. However, the concept will let slower things through, so be careful during close quarters combat."

"I see," said Sayama with a nod before turning to Siegfried next to him.

Siegfried was dressed the same as he had been when he arrived. He wore long black clothes. Other than his black leather gloves, he had no equipment.

"Will you be okay in the mountains like that?"

"I am not the same as I was 60 years ago. A sorcerer's strength is proportional to his age." Siegfried smiled bitterly and turned to Chao. "Do you not have a weapon for him, Chao?"

"You'll protect him, won't you? Also, Sayama's weapon is with the main unit up ahead."

"…The main unit?"

"Yes. Izumo, Kazami, and the others went on up ahead. Go catch up to them.

When Sayama nodded, Chao grinned at him.

"You're supposed to say 'Tes'."

She then took Sayama's left arm. A bandage was wrapped around the arm from the wrist of the glove to the shoulder.

"You should be fine, but don't push yourself. If you reopen the wound, we'll just have to redo it."

"Tes," he replied and Chao smiled.

"Liar," she said and smacked Sayama on the butt.

Another old man then entered the tent. He wore a similar white combat uniform to Sayama and held a white military rucksack. His wavy white hair was tied in the back. That hair waved as he looked toward Sayama.

"Would you look at that. I am Ikkou, the oldest of the four brothers."

"All of you are kind of forgettable."

"We worry about that too. We once tried to give ourselves some individuality by each using a unique speech pattern. Unfortunately, Yonkichi chose a speech pattern that…let's just say it pissed us off. The three of us ended up beating the crap out of him. Ever since, we decided being forgettable might just be for the best."

"I take it back. I think I will remember you all as a group, even if not individually."

"Thank you very much. Now, this rucksack holds food and water. The side contains writing tools and a hand light. Also…we can no longer contact the frontline camp. "

Chao clicked her tongue.

"Sayama, listen up. I'm going to explain the route to you: check your cell phone. That is all."

Sayama checked the cell phone he had brought in his suit.

At some point, the LCD screen had begun to display a map of Mount Hyono.

"You most likely won't be able to communicate using it while inside, but the bare minimum of philosopher's stones packed inside allows it to function as a standalone databank. The manual is inside the memory and it can show you the marching route of our forces and the shortest route there. Understand?"

The map of Mount Hyono showed a curving line moving north while taking a detour around the mountain to the east. The line ended partway through and a small circle was drawn at that point.

"The other members have already gone ahead to the frontline camp. They likely began pursuing the Gram recovery team after that. Also, Shinjou arrived about ten minutes before you two."

"Shinjou-kun did?"

"It seems she was late leaving UCAT. She came in on the helicopter next to yours. Try to hurry," said Chao. "It would take quite something to destroy the frontline camp. Fafnir Custom is probably behind it. They're probably already fighting, so hurry. You need to arrive before 1st-Gear finds the holy sword Gram."

"Is it at all possible to move through the real world to avoid the danger and enter the concept space once we arrive at the point at which we need to be?"

"String vibrations originate at the center, so the center is like a mass of sound. If you jump in there, you'll be destroyed and never be seen again. If your child string vibration was registered when the concept space was created, you could do that, but 1st-Gear created this one. Our only choice is to attack from the outside. Understand ?"

"Tes. So it will not be that easy."

Sayama nodded, took the rucksack, and placed it on his back.

He and Siegfried looked north toward the mountain. They looked at the dark forest and the dark blue night sky behind it. Sayama and the others began walking in that direction. They walked through the night wind that carried the scent of trees.

And just as they entered the forest, the watch on Sayama's left wrist vibrated.

At the same time, he heard a voice.

—Writing has the ability to provide power.

This concept was stronger than any he had heard before.

And he heard something else along with it.

The air shook and a deep sound filled the sky. It was a distant explosion.

Sayama's eyebrows moved and Siegfried spoke to him.

"We need to hurry. Izumo and Kazami are probably drawing the enemies toward them. Izumo is the heir to IAI and their weapons contain the Concept Cores of 6th and 10th. They would make decent bait."

A slight clearing 15 meters across existed within the forest.

It had become a battlefield.

A couple wearing white armored uniforms moved around in the center of that clearing. It was Izumo and Kazami.

They were colored white and black. The large sword and shield-equipped spear they wielded had the same colors.

White cloth was scattered about where they stood. That was the remains of the tent that had been set up there. A few bonfire-like flames existed on the torn and scattered white cloth.

"Ahh, how persistent are you!? Are you all idiots!?"

A different color filled their surroundings. That other color in the clearing, in the surrounding forest, and the sky above was a dark green declaring its presence below the moonlight. That was the color of the cloaks worn by those of 1st Gear.

At a glance, it was clear there were easily 50 people wrapped in dark green.

The enemies moved and Izumo and Kazami moved. Their footsteps were sometimes light and sometimes heavy, but they moved quickly without ever stopping.

Izumo knocked away the enemies who approached while Kazami pierced the enemies beyond those or the ones behind them.

They heard a great number of footsteps and the rustling of the forest. Both were made up of countless small noises piled on top of each other.

Izumo blew away three approaching enemies with a low strike.

“Do you think everyone managed to escape?”

"I don't know. Either way, the situation isn't looking good."

Kazami raised her eyebrows and looked to the fully-cowled single-edged spear and shield in her hands.

The white spear had a curving form and was labeled G-Sp2 on the side. The curving handle at the base of the blade had a small speedometer-like console on the top. Words were being displayed on the LCD screen there.

"Are you in trouble?"

"Yes, I am, G-Sp2. What do you think now that you've blown away a few of them?"

"They are powerful."

"Do you not realize you're 10-Gear's Concept Core?"

"V-Sw here thinks the same."

Izumo held up the large single-edged Cowling Sword he held in his right hand. The console on the grip had words displayed on it.

"Is it fun? Is it fun?"

Kazami held the Cowling Lance G-Sp2 under her right arm and sighed. She held up the long, narrow shield in her left hand.

"They're both like terrible pets."

As she spoke, she stepped to the left.

As soon as she did, Izumo fired a shotgun in his left hand through the area Kazami had been standing in.

The sound of the shot and the sound of the impact came almost simultaneously.

A figure was blown away by the shot. The dark figure which had gotten up from the ground flew backwards with its jaw pointed to the heavens. It then collapsed flatly to the ground.

Izumo looked toward the flat figure collapsed on the ground.

"If they can hit Shades, we must not have screwed up with our bullets. Their armor must change to match the impact of any attack."

"Instead of increasing their defenses, it changes it into a form they can endure."

Izumo holstered the shotgun at his waist. The inside of the holster automatically swapped out the magazine and it was ready for reuse in only two seconds. Once he heard the sound of the magazine exchange, Izumo drew the shotgun once more.

And an instant later…

"!"

Izumo threw the shotgun into the air and pushed Kazami to the side.

He jumped in the opposite direction of Kazami.

"Wh-what!?"

Before Kazami could complete her question, it came.

It was a black wind. It came from the ground and jumped up in an arc.

It appeared from the figure Izumo had defeated with the shotgun. And the form the shadow took was…

"A half-dragon!?"

"Indeed. Remember the name Fafner and then die."

That two meter form that flapped its wings was filled with forward momentum.

The black half-dragon's claws dug into the ground as it filled the space between them with a single step. He was targeting Izumo.

Izumo gasped when he saw black Cowling Sword resting on Fafner's shoulder.

A shimmering in the air rose from the black rectangular blade Fafner swung up.

Izumo read the word carved into the blade via the image it gave him.

"Pressure!"

The instant he shouted that, the power was swung down. The shimmering of the air swelled up along the path of the blade and became a striking weapon several meters across. Partway down, the shimmering

swallowed up the shotgun Izumo had thrown into the air .

The shotgun scattered as if it had been made of sand.

However, Izumo could hear nothing but the loud sound of the shimmering consuming the atmosphere.

Izumo clenched his teeth and tried to swing up V-Sw.

Just as he did, he heard a shout pierce through the air.

It was a girl's voice and the word it spoke was a demand for it all to stop.

"Nooooo!"

Even though he was in combat, Izumo looked away from Fafner.

A white figure stood in the forest to his right.

It was Shinjou.

Shinjou ignored how out of breath she was from running and held up her Cowling Staff.

She had to stop it.

She was panicking. However, that allowed her to ignore everything but what she had to do. She ignored the surrounding enemy forces turning toward her and she ignored her own lack of breath. She focused her mind forward.

She could see that distorted power being swung down toward Izumo.

Izumo was swinging his Cowling Sword from below, but it would all be over if he did not make it in time.

Shinjou held up her staff. She placed the central curving grip on her right shoulder and placed her hands along the triangular cannon extending forward.

"Kh…"

When she lowered her hips and looked forward, she saw three hardcover books bound to the top of the cannon that was labeled Ex-St. Each of them was a

dictionary of a minor language and they were all first editions.

The dictionaries vibrated and a gun sight expanded in empty air before her eyes. It was a two-dimensional image that measured ten centimeters square. That display floating in midair showed Fafner and Izumo because the cannon was being aimed toward them.

The crosshairs in the center of the targeting image selected Fafner.

Shoot, thought Shinjou.

She only had to squeeze the trigger on the side grip in her right hand. That would fire the staff's power.

But she hesitated.

"…!"

For some reason, she could bring no strength into her fingertips.

…Why!?

Her own memories responded to her surprised question.

It was not a clear answer. She recalled the face of the werewolf when it had looked at her in the forest the night before last.

She recalled the emotion on that beast's face. The instant that face carved itself into the surface of her memories, Shinjou shouted out.

"Nooooo!"

She shouted at herself and closed her eyes. She tried to squeeze the trigger.

She tried to convince herself there was nothing in front of her and she was doing nothing more than squeezing the trigger.

A sudden question entered her mind.

Why am I trying to fight?

She wondered if this was due to feeling guilty that she was using this fight to pursue her parents.

…Or am I…

A thought suddenly came to Shinjou. That boy whose stance was the opposite of hers entered her mind.

"…"

She was surprised that she thought of him and she put her thoughts in order.

No, she thought. *I can't choose to use my power with my eyes closed!*

She did not understand the meaning of that thought, but she would no longer close her eyes.

She opened her eyes and looked forward.

In that instant, Shinjou's vision was filled with destruction. The forest on the opposite side of the clearing from her was blown away.

The lines of trees snapped and something appeared from within the forest.

It was a white dragon.

“Fafnir Custom!?” shouted Shinjou.

In response to her shout, everything began to move.

And as a result, a single explosion occurred.

Chapter 25: The Path to Overcome Suspicion

Chapter 25

“The Path to Overcome Suspicion”

The decision to hurry is made by you
The demand that you hurry is made by the footsteps
That hurrying is accomplished by your will

The decision to hurry is made by you

The demand that you hurry is made by the footsteps

That hurrying is accomplished by your will

Sayama and Siegfried ran through a dark mountain.

Their only map was the one on Sayama's cell phone. Their current location was…

"The shadow of the mountain over there means we are almost there."

The depths of the forest before them looked blue rather than black. The moonlight fell broadly across that area. That was their destination.

Five minutes had passed since the explosion they had heard earlier.

Sayama hurried. He tread on the grass, tread on the dirt, and moved forward. Only one thought filled his mind.

…I still have not found Shinjou-kun.

She had definitely entered the battlefield ahead of him.

What was she doing?

There was something he wished of her. He did not want to lose her before that.

As he picked up his hurrying pace a bit further, the forest opened up ahead of him. The light of the moon spread out before his eyes.

Beyond a drop of about a meter was a clearing.

Sayama kicked off the dirt and leaped. Siegfried followed beside him and did not seem out of breath.

Sayama checked his surroundings while in the air.

The remains of a white tent existed in the center of the clearing, but everything in the area had been destroyed.

There were a few holes opened in the ground. They were large enough for several people to fit inside and it looked as if a giant hoe had created them. The forest on the other side of the clearing had also been affected by

the destruction. For a width of about five meters, the cedar and broad-leaved trees making up the forest had been felled.

"This is…" he muttered as he landed.

"Sayama."

Urged on by Siegfried, Sayama began to run.

He had been running for a while now, but he put his full strength into it from the very first step.

As Sayama ran, he detected a movement in the air behind him.

It came from a bullet in the corner of his vision. The bullet glowed like a firefly.

Several sounds of paper tearing came from the forest to the north.

And an identical number of light bullets shot toward them.

They were fast. They pursued Sayama and Siegfried and dirt and grass shot up into the air.

Sayama gathered strength in his legs as he heard the bullets strike the ground. He had noticed something odd about that noise.

…The tempo is dull.

He took action based on that thought.

He leaned forward and then swung his body upwards with all his strength.

Immediately afterwards, a light bullet passed right in front of his eyes. This was a single shot.

Sayama leaned forward again and leaped forward. He heard the shot he had avoided slicing through the field.

…So the real one aims for the face.

Sayama wondered what would have happened had he not noticed that tempo.

He ran.

He realized the sounds of bullets hitting the ground had ceased to follow him.

That showed his opponent was done playing around. Sayama knew he could not let his guard down.

He decided he should have avoided that earlier bullet more barely or even let it graze him. In that case, his enemy would not have put their guard up.

He clicked his tongue and leaped toward one of the holes opened in the ground.

It was a hole made of soft, bare earth. He did not slide inside it; he leaped inside.

After his feet landed on the bottom, he leaned his back against the northern slope.

A bullet then grazed the edge of the ground above him in order to keep him from peeking out.

…What a well-prepared response.

Sayama ducked his head down and looked around. The hole was about a meter deep and three meters wide.

From this position, the northern forest was on the mountainside. He just barely lifted his head up and was able to see that northern forest. However, the forest was too dark to see anything.

The ground burst in front of his eyes. The flying pieces of dirt struck something near his head and fell.

Afterwards, he once more heard the sound of paper tearing from the northern forest.

…A sniper. Is it just one? No.

Sayama denied his own simple question.

While running before, the bullets had come in rapid-fire. And in no time afterwards, a single shot had targeted his head. Given those two facts…

"There are probably at least two of them."

He had almost no knowledge concerning 1st-Gear guns.

However, they were likely using the same type of rifle the knight had used the day before. In that case, the enemy was using a book or some corresponding object as

ammunition. That prevented the guns from being made very small. The enemy had chosen sniping because their weapons were big and not very mobile.

The reason there were two enemies came from there. With a rapid-fire gun and a sniping gun, they could determine the range together and they could calmly handle an enemy whether that opponent charged them or tried to run.

The rapid-fire gun would be used to calculate the range and the sniper would take out the enemy. That had to be their pattern.

But Sayama frowned.

These enemies were firing small bullets of light. Firing would make their position easier to determine. During the day was fine, but those bullets were ill-suited for nighttime sniping. He had two guesses as to the reason behind it.

Either the enemy was taking him lightly or they were trying to draw his attention away from something else.

When he thought about the latter option, Sayama gasped.

…We have to catch up to Shinjou-kun and the others.

Siegfried was nowhere to be seen, but Sayama assumed he was in one of the other holes.

"Do not tell me he is waiting to see how I will handle this situation."

Just as a grin appeared on his lips, a stone rolled into the hole.

"?"

Sayama looked down at what had rolled to his feet. It was a round stone about the perfect size to hold in the fist. It was black and it had words carved into its surface.

The meaning of the words appeared in his mind. They said, "Explosive – After Five Seconds".

"!"

It had been thrown into this hole from the northern forest.

Sayama showed no surprise, fear, or fright. He reflexively picked up the stone.

And a smile naturally appeared on his lips. Words spilled from his mouth that had nothing to do with the desire to hurry in his heart.

“This is a death I can avoid.”

And he took action.

In the mountainside forest looking down on the clearing, two 1st-Gear soldiers aimed at their target.

They both had their dark green cloaks covering their heads as they aimed bipod-equipped rifles toward the clearing.

The rifle on the right had a canvas hardcover book bound to it on the top. It was easy to exchange the magazine, but it had poor stability. The rifle on the left had its book bound to the bottom. It took more effort to exchange the magazine, but each shot was quite stable.

The former was generally used for rapid-fire and the latter was mainly used for single sniper shots.

The sniper drew back the arm he had thrown the explosive rock with and sank back down.

He made sure the rifle magazine had bound properly using the cocking lever to the side of the grip and he moved to peer through the scope.

In an instant, he saw motion coming from the hole he had thrown the explosive rock into.

The target's head moved above the right edge of the hole and jumped out.

The rapid-fire shooter to the right clicked his tongue in joy.

The sniper thought making noise like that was a bad habit and he pulled the trigger without looking through the scope.

The rifle shook. The cocking lever shot forward and a light bullet flew.

And the bullet hit.

The object that came from the hole seemed to have really been a head. Something white scattered as the bullet clearly hit.

Just as the sniper raised his head slightly, the soldier on the right spoke.

“He’s still alive!”

The sniper narrowed his vision and saw the white figure still trying to jump from the right of the hole.

It must not have been a fatal blow. The sniper calmly peered through the scope.

The white he saw was a coat. Several bullets pierced through it. Those came from the rapid-fire rifle to the right.

Repeated sounds of canvas tearing came from that rifle . An equal number of yellowish-green light bullets flew and tore holes in the white figure jumping from the hole.

The cover of the book in the right-side rifle’s magazine burst and scattered. The book had used up all of its power.

But the sniper realized something in the next moment.

That enemy was hollow.

It was not a human that had jumped from the hole. It was just a coat. The enemy was still alive.

He placed a hand on the cocking lever and began to pull it. But as he looked through the scope, his eyes fell on the coat that fell powerlessly into the hole.

Where had the boy wearing it gone?

"…?"

He took his eyes from the scope and looked forward.

He was there.

The boy had already jumped from the left side of the hole. That was the opposite side to where he had thrown the coat.

He had jumped out at the exact moment the soldiers had been looking through their scopes and targeting the coat.

The sniper felt uneasy. Had this enemy calculated their actions?

The rapid-fire shooter seemed to have realized the same thing. He loudly clicked his tongue and began exchanging the book.

That meant it was the sniper's turn.

The enemy began running toward them.

They were approximately 20 paces apart. The boy could fill that space in five seconds.

But the sniper could act sooner. He could cock the rifle in one second, it would take another second to hold the rifle up as the sound of tearing canvas came from below it, aiming without the scope would take a second, and pulling the trigger would take a final second. He could finish it in a total of four seconds. But…

"Hey," said the other soldier. "What happened to the explosive rock you threw?"

The sniper moved his finger away from the trigger.

He saw a single truth.

The boy had stopped moving.

He had been running toward them, but now he stood still with his arms lightly spread to the side as if asking to be shot. The light of the round moon floating in the sky illuminated the boy's smile.

At the same moment, something fell in between the two soldiers.

The sniper assumed it was a fruit, but it was not.

It was a round stone. It had familiar words carved on its surface: Explosive – After Five Seconds. And black paint had added another few words on the stone.

The writing was unfamiliar, but he understood it from the image that appeared in his mind. It said…

"Plus five seconds!"

Throwing the coat had not been to buy time to jump out of the hole. It had been to ensure they did not see the stone being thrown into the air. And the reason he had run toward them was…

"He wanted us to target him so we wouldn't move…"

But understanding it now made no difference.

Just as the boy swung his arms up, the stone exploded next to them.

Sayama saw two soldiers fly out from the flames and smoke in the forest.

They were ten meters away. They were surrounded by a flaming wind that roasted the trees and leaves. The blast of the explosion had sent them tumbling out into the clearing. At a glance, they seemed to have injuries on their faces but were still breathing.

Sayama glanced around.

He spotted a tall dark figure standing next to him. It was Siegfried.

“So it cost you your coat. You cannot do that a second time.”

“No need to be shy. I do not mind if you give me honest praise.”

"Do not say the same thing Sayama Kaoru did."

"Now that is good to hear. If I am saying the same things as my grandfather now, I will be saying things even more wonderful than him tomorrow."

Siegfried smiled and Sayama did so bitterly.

"More importantly," said Sayama as he looked forward.

He looked into the forest beyond the fading smoke of the explosion.

A single figure stood there. This figure was dyed in the color black.

The short figure wore a black dress and a three-cornered hat that hid her face.

"A new opponent… A witch?" muttered Sayama, but he denied it. "No, a grim reaper."

This figure held a long scythe.

Sayama suddenly realized Siegfried had taken a defensive stance.

He gave a suspicious look and Siegfried swung his right hand downwards.

"I heard about this while I was in 1st-Gear. I was told where lost souls went in that closed table world."

"An interesting topic. Please continue."

"At one point in their history, an underworld was developed for those lost souls to live in. That underworld is a type of concept space and its string vibration is near the borderline between positive and negative, so it can be expanded in any Gear."

"And what tool is used to open this underworld?"

"The scythe known as Requiem Sense. Regin's older brother, the old man named Hagen who combined with Fafnir Custom, had worked as the manager of the underworld."

A single sound seemed to come in response. It was the mewing of a cat.

"…"

And then the grim reaper moved.

She held the scythe vertically above her right shoulder.

Her right hand brought the handle directly above and her fingers traced over the writing carved into the surface of that handle.

Sayama heard a voice. It was a high-pitched and monotonous girl's voice.

"I am that which is with you."

As she spoke, the words carved into the scythe's handle and blade began to emit light.

"Hear me, those who were lost yet not lost."

The light was blue at first.

"That is your pride."

It turned to white.

"That is your memory."

Then yellow, red, and finally crimson.

"That is your spirit."

Just as the light turned black, the girl opened her mouth and pointed the tip of the scythe behind her.

As if in response, wind blew by next to Sayama.

Before he could even mutter “not good”, Siegfried moved forward.

He wordlessly charged into the forest in his black outfit. He swung his right hand and a single piece of paper shot from his sleeve. All Sayama could tell was that it had something written on it.

The word extended from the paper and into the empty air. That word of German glowed a bluish-white and extended to a length of one meter.

“Schneide!”

Siegfried held the paper hilt and quickly closed the distance between him and his opponent.

He swung the blade of writing toward his opponent’s neck.

He took the shortest route to aim from below. A few trees were sliced by the blade along the way. With a sound of tearing fibers, Siegfried continued forward and left those trees behind him.

He arrived.

His attack swung through.

However, the girl in black avoided the strike. She merely took a step back.

Sayama watched Siegfried's back.

The pressure of Siegfried's sword strike knocked the girl's three-cornered hat up slightly. The blade split the very end of it and the brim of the hat flipped up.

The face hidden below the hat was now visible. Siegfried's blade of writing illuminated that face.

"Brunhild Schild," muttered Sayama.

And he realized something else: Siegfried had stopped moving.

In response, Brunhild returned her face from the bent back posture she had taken to evade.

Her normal expressionless look was gone. The ends of her eyebrows were lowered and her lips were twisted to the side.

"…!"

She hung her head down. She tightly gripped the scythe handle in both hands and opened her mouth.

"Open…"

She took a breath.

"Open, gate of the abyss!"

Brunhild drew the scythe back. And she dropped it straight down.

The scythe split space behind her.

The sound was similar to paper being torn.

That meter long slice stopped when the bottom of the handle struck the ground. The blade stopped just a few centimeters above the shoulder of her black clothing.

Brunhild then grabbed the handle and spun it around to point the tip forward.

In response, light appeared behind her. That yellowish-green light filled the line the scythe blade had travelled through. The line split vertically, tore horizontally, and widened.

“Why?” muttered Brunhild.

The tall man in black took a defensive stance before her.

Seeing that, Brunhild shouted with her head still hanging down.

“Why!?”

She thrust the scythe forward and cried out.

“Attack, knight of enmity!”

As Brunhild took a step back, something appeared from the opened rift of light.

It was a giant knight wearing full armor.

This armored knight made of light stuck only his upper body out from that space. He was about six meters tall. He held a sword in each hand, both of which were near twice his height.

The two swords produced a great roar as the knight swung them down.

The sound rose into the sky and the atmosphere moved as the attack shot down.

The gigantic double strikes flew toward the ground as if falling.

Brunhild shut her eyes.

And in that moment, a pair of male and female voices cried out from the forest to the right and the sky above.

“You idiot!”

Sayama saw it. As that pair of giant swords was swung down, two powers slammed into them.

Izumo came in from the right wearing a white armored uniform.

The giant single-edge sword in his hand fired white light from its blade.

And Kazami came in from above wearing a white armored uniform.

She dropped straight down from a height of ten meters above the knight of light. She aimed her long spear straight down as she did. The single-edged tip of that spear fired a white light as well.

They both struck the knight's blades with their own weapons.

They both let out cries of exertion that began with "ah" .

"…!"

It all collided.

A metallic sound similar to glass shattering rang out.

Izumo deflected the knight's right sword inward.

Kazami deflected the knight's left sword inward as well.

The knight's swords struck each other in midair.

A new metallic noise rang out.

In the next moment, Izumo circled around below the knight's arms and struck the two swords from below.

Kazami had leaped into the air with her previous attack, so she struck the swords from above for a second time.

Kazami jumped through the air and toward Sayama and Izumo used the follow-through of his swing to turn toward him.

Immediately afterwards, straight cracks ran through the six meter knight, starting with the two swords.

“Don’t stand around and watch! Run!” shouted Izumo
.

After that obvious warning, the knight exploded.

A splendid wind swept through the forest.

Brunhild stood with Requiem Sense held in front of her.

“…”

The forest had disappeared around her.

With the exception of a fan-shaped area behind where she stood, a crater about ten meters across had been formed. Brunhild sighed as she saw a slight red light coming from the scythe’s blade.

“Did you retrieve them?” she asked the blade while looking around where several lights flew about like fireflies.

Brunhild swung Requiem Sense around her in both hands. The inertia created by the weight of the blade

made her lean her body back on her heels to keep her balance. The lights approached the swinging blade and were swallowed up.

After spinning around about five times, darkness returned to her surroundings.

"But this darkness still has the moonlight."

She glanced around her surroundings once more.

Only two collapsed 1st-Gear soldiers were in the clearing connected to the crater. Those she considered her enemy were gone.

Brunhild let out a breath and looked to her feet. She looked to the black cat hiding behind her legs.

"Let's wake those two up and meet with the others."

"Yes. But…that shaved off the fur on my tail."

"I see."

The cat tilted his head at that response.

"Are you okay, Brunhild? You don't seem very energetic."

"I'm fine. Everything is back to normal."

"Back to normal?"

"Yes," said Brunhild expressionlessly. "My grudge and everything else is back to normal."

Sayama ran after Izumo who had taken the lead.

After running for about two minutes, they left the forest and arrived at a wide basin.

It contained a grassy field where the new UCAT base had been set up.

The flames of lamps lit the area and others dressed like them were gathering there.

A fair number of people were there in addition to Izumo and Kazami, but Shinjou alone was absent.

"I see," said Sayama with a nod as he caught his breath.

He would have to go find her.

Having made up his mind, Sayama looked over the people there once more.

There were about 50 people in all. They were mostly dressed in white armored uniforms, but there was a pair wearing black just like Siegfried. Ooshiro Itaru stood with his metal cane and Sf carried a large load on her back.

Itaru pushed his sunglasses up his nose and looked toward Sayama.

"So you came, you ignorant brat," he said with a frown.

Sayama nodded and folded his arms.

"I have come in order to learn everything."

That exchange caused the surrounding people to focus on them bit by bit. Sayama heard footsteps, the rustling of clothing, and the clattering of metal equipment as everyone turned toward them.

In response, Sayama threw out his chest and looked around at all of them. He took in all of their gazes and spoke.

“Is the special unit for the Leviathan Road here?”

“They are. For starters, there’s me.”

The person who stepped forward first was Izumo who had been standing right next to him.

“How about we check over the members of Team Leviathan real quick?”

He smiled as he held his large Cowling Sword.

“Okay. You can start by giving my name. I’d love it if you added ‘the great’ afterwards.”

"You are Izumo the Great Idiot." Sayama waited for three seconds while staring at Izumo's face from below. " Hm. You did not seem to love it."

"Enough. I was an idiot to expect common sense from you."

"Why are the two of you acting like idiots?" asked Kazami from next to Izumo.

Sayama looked toward her and Izumo.

"I suppose the two of you are like the forwards of the team."

"Yes. Kaku and I take the vanguard during missions. Shinjou provides backup for the vanguard. And the rear guard…"

A figure a head taller than the rest stepped forward from the back of the crowd. He was a man with dark brown skin. He was bald and had a short beard on the very end of his chin. His armored uniform must not have fit him because the neck had been left open.

He walked forward and held out a hand.

When Sayama shook his hand, he felt great strength squeezing his hand. The man gave a smile and spoke.

"I am Robert Boldman. Despite the name, I am a second generation naturalized member of 6th-Gear."

"He is a former major in the United States Air Force. He handles commanding and coordinating with the general division as well as backup during emergencies," explained Kazami with a smile.

"His nickname is Baldy. No teasing him, okay?" said Izumo, also with a smile.

"I get the feeling you do not know the meaning of that word. Or is it just me?"

While still smiling, Kazami kicked Izumo away and called over the next member.

"This is Sibyl. You received a transmission from her, right?"

"Yes," replied Sayama as the color of the surrounding light seemed to change.

A tall woman with long blonde hair stepped forward. She wore the female version of the white armored uniform and it had a skirt and long sleeves tightly attached. She turned her blue, drooping eyes toward Sayama.

“I am Sibyl. I am in charge of communications and maintaining equipment on site. I see you decided to come, Sayama-sama.”

She bowed and Sayama nodded in return.

“I did.”

That brought a smile to Sibyl’s lips and she took a silent step back.

In her place, Ooshiro Kazuo stepped forward with a notebook computer under his arm.

He raised his right thumb and Kazami gave a smile and a nod.

“That should be enough. Okay, next.”

"Ahh, Kazami-kun! That's abuse of the elderly! You monster wife!"

"Shut up. Okay, the one who handles the controllers for concept spaces and things like that is-…"

Before Kazami had even finished speaking, Sayama found Ooki standing before him while wearing a white armored uniform.

For some reason, Ooki's ears extended out to the sides.

Her eyes were bent in a smile. She held up a hand while looking toward Sayama.

"Hiiii!"

Sayama suddenly flicked her in the forehead with his right hand.

"O-ow!! Wh-what are you do-…ow ow ow ow ow!"

Sayama pulled on Ooki's long ears, but they did not come off. They were real.

"What is this? Are you Ooki-sensei? Are you really her ? If so, give me some proof."

"Um…uh…well…proof? A-ahhh! I can't come up with anything so quickly!"

"Damn. Only the real one would act this foolish. Okay then." Sayama was still grabbing onto Ooki's ears. "Why are you here, Ooki-sensei? This is a dangerous place. Hurry back to your Okutama apartment and exterminate the roach you said appeared in your kitchen. And take out your trash."

"I-I already sprayed bug spray to deal with the roach! I still haven't taken out the trash, though." Ooki took a breath. "Anyway, I am a member of Team Leviathan. I have been here longer than you, and don't you forget it."

"In other words, you will be my subordinate."

"Khh," groaned Ooki and Sayama let go of her ears.

He looked over at Kazami for confirmation.

"Yes. Ooki-sensei is a 10th-Gear tree spirit. I don't really understand it myself, but there you have it."

"You didn't have to say you don't understand it."

"That's right, Kazami-kun. Ooki-kun does an excellent job. …Even if it looks like she only randomly pokes at the buttons."

Everyone in the crowd began nodding and muttering in agreement with Ooshiro's comment.

Ooki clenched her fists up at her shoulders.

"I don't do it randomly! I do it as the ideas enter my head!"

"That's called doing it randomly!" shouted back everyone in unison.

Sayama patted Ooki on her shoulders that had drooped in dejection.

"At any rate, you have given everyone a common factor they can relate to, Ooki-sensei. That is a wonderful thing."

"I-I don't want you to relate to that!"

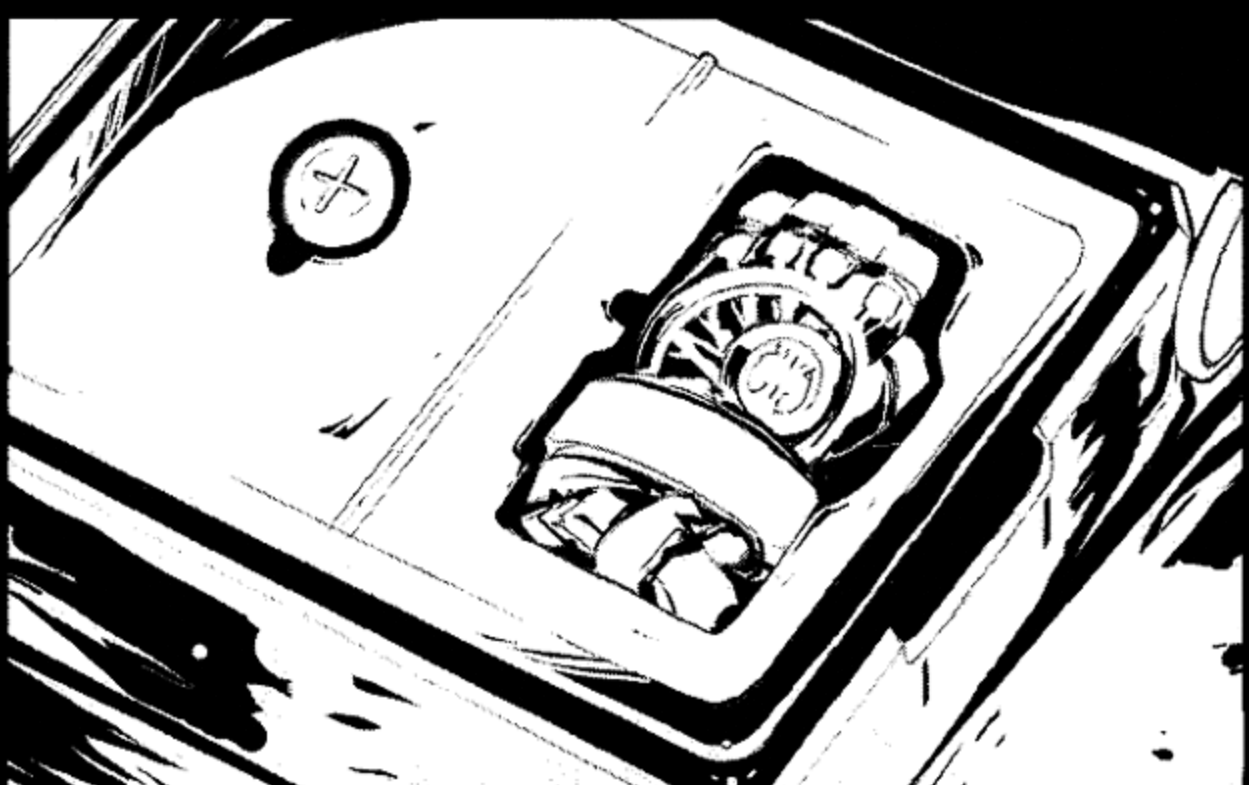
Sayama ignored her objection and spoke.

"Now, everyone. Let us begin here."

Chapter 26: Recommendation to Lie Prone

Chapter 26

“Recommendation to Lie Prone”



A pain once had
Is related to your current self
By becoming a pain someday

A pain once had

Is related to your current self

By becoming a pain someday

Sayama and the others checked on various things before heading out.

First, they placed a simple table in the center of the basin area and used it as a meeting spot.

Ooshiro Itaru and Sf stood at the side of the table pointed toward the mountain.

Across the table from them, Sayama stood with the others around him.

As Sayama watched, Itaru placed his cane on the ground.

"The ultimate objective of the Leviathan Road is to bring every concept to UCAT and release them all simultaneously. Doing that that will suppress the

negative concepts here in Low-Gear. You understand that, right?"

"Where are these negative concepts? I have heard 1st-Gear's concepts are contained in the Concept Core that is currently split between the sword known as Gram and Fafnir Custom. But what about the negative concepts of Low-Gear?"

Ooshiro gave no response, but Sayama began to think upon seeing the smile that appeared on his lips.

And after thinking, he spoke.

"Each Gear's Concept Core is contained in a weapon or the like that is unique to that Gear."

"And?"

"The negative concepts are contained within the mythology that does not fit into the other ten Gears. Namely, the bible."

"And if they are? What would it be that contains Low-Gear's negative concepts?"

Sayama nodded in response and glanced at Baku on his shoulder.

"That would be…Babel. Am I wrong?"

Everyone turned toward Itaru. Izumo and Kazami nodded and everyone else frowned.

As some people whispered "Babel?", Itaru gave a slight nod while still smiling.

"You really are an annoying brat. You are correct. … Did you see that tower?"

"Yes."

"I see. That is your ultimate destination. The ten negative concepts reside in that tower and it was the epicenter of the great Kansai earthquake. To reach it, you must deal with all the other Gears."

Having said that, Itaru pulled a metal case out from under the simple table.

The case he placed on the table with a heavy metallic noise was the color of iron and 30 cm square. It was

about 10 centimeters thick and the letter L was carved into the surface.

Sayama looked at Itaru, but the man only silently held the case out toward Sayama.

As if taking Itaru's place, Ooshiro stepped up to his right and nodded.

"Open it."

Sayama had already begun undoing the lock on the side of the case.

With the sound of air escaping, the upper lid shifted.

Sayama placed a hand on that lid and opened the case.

The inside was divided into two blocks.

The left block contained a metal medallion. Its silver surface had a plus symbol carved into it. And the right block contained…

"A glove?"

A black, fingerless gauntlet sat within a cavity in the block created to match its shape.

It was made to protect the wrist and other points and the top had a round metal hard point attached.

It was made for the left hand.

As Sayama observed it, he heard Ooshiro speak.

“We are giving that to you. Its name is Georgius. That is the name of a holy lance.”

Sayama frowned.

“You mean the lance St. George used when slaying the dragon? I know one theory said it was Longinus, the same lance used to stab the son of god.”

“Yes. It seems to have been named after that. It was named after the lance that can injure god and slay a dragon. However…” Ooshiro trailed off and Sayama looked up at him. When their gazes met, Ooshiro nodded and continued. “We do not know what power this Georgius has. We do not know many of the details about what it is. It is a concept weapon with many mysteries.”

Sayama glanced around. Everyone was focused on Georgius in front of him. Kazami, who stood behind him, suddenly realized he was looking at her.

"This is the first time I've seen it."

She nodded and so did everyone else.

Puzzlement could be seen on their faces, so Sayama spoke their doubts and his own question to Ooshiro.

"If you do not know what good this gauntlet is, why was it stored so exaggeratedly?"

"It is a memento of your mother."

The instant Sayama comprehended those words, he felt a tightening in the left side of his chest.

Intense pain filled his body. It was much stronger than it had ever been before.

"…"

He could tell everyone had frozen in place and was staring at his back. Sayama placed his right hand on his chest and grabbed at it.

From behind, only a slight movement should have been visible, but they might have noticed.

But it did not matter. If they had noticed, there was nothing he could do about it.

He endured the pain and took a breath. And then Itaru opened his mouth across the table.

“So you get chest pains when you hear about your parents or your grandfather. You intend to walk down the Leviathan Road with that odd bomb inside you, don’t you? Your father died and left you behind, your mother tried to kill you along with herself, and your grandfather passed away without telling you anything of import. … Sayama Mikoto, you are a pitiable person. A truly pitiable person.”

A small stir spread through the surrounding people. A mixture of voices and gasps responded to Itaru’s final words.

Pitiable.

Sayama vigorously raised his head against that atmosphere that seemed to be looking down on him.

He glared. He glared straight forward where Itaru lowered his sunglasses and looked at Sayama as if glancing up at him. And just as Sayama was about to speak a rude word toward those eyes and the smile on those lips…

"Everyone has a weakness," said a figure standing to the left.

Itaru, Sf, Ooshiro, and even Kazami and the others behind him looked to his left.

Everyone's gazes gathered on Ooki.

"Um…" she said as she placed a hand on her chest and looked up into the sky. "But it is overcoming that weakness that gives us valuable experience. For example, Itaru-san, you have your cane and Sf-san to help you with the disability in your legs. Sayama-kun will find something or someone to act as his cane or his Sf-san. I don't know if that will be this glove or someone from UCAT, though. But…"

Ooki nodded and glanced around. She looked at Itaru, Sf, Izumo, Kazami, Sibyl, Boldman, Ooshiro, and her other comrades.

"Sayama-kun will be fine. I guarantee it." Ooki seemed incredibly satisfied with her own words. "Yes, yes. That's just how it is. For example, Izumo-kun is an idiot, but Kazami-san corrects him. Kazami-san is violent, but Izumo-kun absorbs it all. Mr. Boldman is bald, but everyone pretends not to see it and it helps make him more unique. Am I wrong?"

"I think you might have just ruined everything you had built up, Ooki-sensei."

"Eh?" asked Ooki as three hands grabbed her collar and dragged her into the crowd.

While listening to Ooki's "Hyaaaaah!", Sayama sighed.

The pain in his chest was gone. It had disappeared. And so he spoke to Itaru.

"You can decide whether I am pitiable or not based on my results from now on. Let me ask you one thing: were my parents members of UCAT?"

"Yes. They were disguised as IAI personnel and they acquired Georgius during a certain mission." Itaru clicked his tongue once, but his smile did not disappear. "Here's another job to add to the Leviathan Road. It seems Georgius has a right hand as well, but it was lost and not even UCAT can find it. You find it on your own."

"Is it needed to complete the Leviathan Road?"

Ooshiro Kazuo answered this question.

He nodded and said, "All I can tell you is that this is a weapon that can bend any concept to your will and there is meaning in having both the left and right hand. Everything else, including its creator, is unknown."

"That is all…my mother said?"

"Yes. Your mother, Yume-san, told us that and left it with us. We believed her that it holds some kind of meaning for the Leviathan Road."

After Ooshiro finished speaking, Sayama suddenly realized a sigh had escaped his lips.

He recalled his memories of the past and of his mother right up to the line of the dangerous territory.

He recalled a woman with short black hair and slightly sharp eyes. This was a created memory.

He had little memory of what she had done for him or told him.

She hoped I could become someone who could do something, he thought. *And she tried to kill me.*

His memories were vague, but he had gained something new he could add to them:

Georgius.

"It is hard to understand. She had hopes for me, tried to lose me, and gave me this."

She was selfish, that was for sure. However, Sayama looked down at Georgius.

"Can I take this?"

"Yes, but be careful. We are unable to equip Georgius. When we try to touch it, we are spatially repelled. Trying to force one's hand into it will rip your fingers apart."

Ooshiro showed off his left palm. White scars from some slight lacerations were visible.

"I see," said Sayama.

But he grabbed Georgius without hesitation. From the way Ooshiro jerked his left hand back in fear, it seemed that was when the rejection reaction would have occurred.

"It seems nothing happened."

Sayama equipped Georgius on his dominant left hand. It was a bit large for him, but tightening the band on the

wrist set it in place. The scars on his fist were hidden as the characteristic warmth of leather covered his hand.

The palm had a shallow semispherical metal part corresponding to the hard point on the back of the hand. That half sphere had a plus sign carved into it. Other than that, the gauntlet was unremarkable.

Sayama pulled the plus sign medallion out of the case. He placed the medallion in the round hard point on the top of Georgius. It fit perfectly.

As soon as he did, Georgius suddenly began to vibrate .

"…"

Wind gathered and was sucked into the space between the medallion and Georgius.

Everyone froze in place around Sayama. Izumo stopped pulling on Ooki's ears and shouted out.

"…What kind of special effect is this!?"

A word rang out over the other voices of protest. An unfamiliar male voice came from the surface of the gauntlet.

"I…!"

But that was as far as it went. The wind disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared.

Georgius stopped shaking and calm returned.

Everyone stared at Sayama while still in defensive stances. As those gazes fell on him, Sayama lightly shook his left hand with Georgius on it. Nothing happened. After determining that fact, Sayama spoke to the others.

"It seems something even more amazing will happen with both of them."

With the black cat on her shoulder, Brunhild met up with and marched with her comrades.

Their loud and hurried footsteps travelled toward where the holy sword Gram had fallen. They had

recently calculated out the general location, so their priority was gaining control of that area.

UCAT's Gram recovery team was closer than they were. They had to catch up with that team and defeat them.

Fafnir Custom was at the lead of the marching army.

He tried to fell as few trees as he could manage, but he still created a path for the rest.

The sounds of his four massive legs and of toppling trees could be heard.

Brunhild walked quickly along while making sure to look at the break in each felled tree so she could remember it. Those around her did the same. And most likely…

…Venerable Hagen is doing it as well.

They were occasionally ambushed by enemies with guns and occasionally came across explosives.

But they were all stopped and quickly crushed by Fafnir Custom.

Fafnir Custom spoke as he received the effects of the gunfire and explosions.

“Do not interfere.”

The others obeyed him. They did not draw their swords or aim their guns.

As Brunhild watched, she saw that Fafner did the same as he walked behind Fafnir Custom.

The white dragon of steel took on all the fighting.

The group of green and black cloaks merely walked forward.

And then several white figures became visible in front of Fafnir Custom. There were at least ten of them.

“We’ve caught up to UCAT!”

Fafner raised his voice and everyone put more strength into walking.

This was UCAT’s Gram recovery team that had been sent ahead. As Brunhild watched from behind Fafnir Custom, they stopped moving and turned their weapons

toward the dragon. It seemed their plan was to make a stand here.

That's impossible, thought Brunhild.

Suddenly, she felt a soft sensation on her cheek. It was the tail of the cat on her shoulder.

"…?"

The cat met her gaze for just an instant and then looked behind her.

Brunhild's pace slowed slightly as she walked.

She looked behind herself as well.

What she saw first were the others walking toward her . Their forward-bent march made them appear to be approaching her specifically.

As she cowered down a bit, those green and black cloaks slipped past her and walked on ahead. No one said a word. They only looked forward and marched toward the awaiting battle.

But Brunhild saw something else. It was even further behind those marching soldiers.

It was in the distant forest beyond the mountain range. She saw a light so small one had to pay close attention to even see it.

That was the forest basin where they had been not long before.

It had been abandoned as a gathering point, so no one should have been left.

"…They're coming, aren't they?"

She stopped walking altogether as she muttered those words.

The others continued forward like a muddy stream flowing beside her. They continued forward to pursue their enemy and acquire Gram.

But Brunhild had a thought: were they really driving their enemy away?

She heard Fafner's voice behind her in the direction everyone was headed.

"What is it?" he asked.

He received an answer from Fafnir Custom further up ahead. His voice was partially drowned out by the wind.

"I asked her to stop the enemy pursuit. We will hurry ahead and retrieve Gram."

Brunhild shut her eyes at those considerate words. She had no recollection of him asking that of her.

She could not thank Hagen. She merely held Requiem Sense up a bit. His auxiliary vision devices would see it.

The moonlight fell down as if sliding across the curve of the scythe.

Brunhild began to walk while thinking how obtrusive that light was.

She walked forward. She walked in the opposite direction of the others.

Sayama and the others prepared to head back out into battle.

Sayama stood within the basin. The others gathered a few meters in front of him as if creating a wall.

Sayama swung his right hand in front of them all. That hand that sliced through the air and stopped held six scraps of paper. He used his thumb to spread those six cards out.

Each of them had the word “steel” written on it.

“Now. This is all of our unbreakable and unbendable ‘ steel’. Sf-kun, if you do not mind.”

After Sayama finished, Itaru spoke.

“Go. Earn yourself some gratitude.”

“Tes.”

As she spoke, Sf took a step in front of the others.

Sayama swung his right wrist and threw the six pieces of paper into the air.

They no longer moved like paper. They rotated and flew up with real weight to them. That paper was now “ steel”.

As the lights set up in that basin illuminated the paper, the paper reflected that crimson light.

Sf raised her right hand.

By the time she did, the sounds of six gunshots on the ground and six metallic noises in the air had all faded away.

Sf’s hand had already returned to its original position.

While paying no heed to the smoke spreading out before her eyes, she wordlessly bowed toward Sayama and then toward everyone else. As her white-haired head lowered, six small lights fell at her feet.

They were empty shell cases.

Everyone there gulped, but Sf returned to the wall of people without caring. Unlike before, the wall of people split open to let her in.

And as she turned her back, six pieces of paper fell to the ground.

Sayama picked them up. He reached down and grabbed the papers that had stabbed into the soft ground.

“Now then. This one, this one, and this one are no good. They have holes.”

The fourth one had a large dent where it had bent in the shape of a bullet.

“This one seems to have been about as effective as a bulletproof textile. The writing is very nice, though.”

“Ahh,” groaned Kazami at the front of the wall as she brought a hand to her forehead. “But I earned the intermediate level in calligraphy.”

“This cursive one was tougher. It only bent.”

“Oh! That was me! That one’s mine!”

Ooshiro took a break from typing up records on his laptop to joyously raise his right thumb.

Sayama ignored him. He picked up the final paper and frowned.

“This is splendid. It did not bend and it does not have a scratch on it.”

He showed it to everyone.

“But what is with this writing? It looks like the death throes of an earthworm suffering from a twisted intestine . Who wrote this curse?”

“It was me, you damn idiot! Are you trying to pick a fight!?”

Izumo took a step forward and the shoulders of everyone behind him drooped.

“I knew it,” they said in unison.

“What do you mean by that!?” he shouted.

"It's okay, it's okay," said Kazami as she patted his shoulder. She sighed and added, "I can't believe my intermediate level calligraphy lost to these worms…"

"Hey. Are you trying to comfort me or complain? Make up your mind."

"It seems what matters most is the image the writing gives you, not the technical shape of the character. Instead of writing it neatly so the Japanese can read it, we need to make it so anyone can understand it… Writing that looks more like a picture may be more effective in this world. Here, take this." Sayama tossed the paper to Izumo. "Now, Izumo. Gather all the writing tools here and write this character on as many objects as time allows. Write it on our equipment, the paper we have, stones on the ground, and sticks you find. Strengthen everything we can use."

Sayama nodded.

"So written information has power in this concept space…"

He walked forward. He made his way to Ooshiro who held his laptop under his arm.

"Old man."

"Hm? What is it?"

"Could you give me all of that computer's storage devices to use as explosives?"

"What!? Wh-what are you talking about!? Explosives!? Wh-what writing makes it an explosive!?"

"Shut up, you ancient otaku. Answer my question honestly. …How much disk space on that computer is filled with 18+ games?"

"Th-thirty gigs maybe?"

"…Thirty?"

"F-fifty… N-no, I think it might have been 120."

"Have you fully completed all of those games using your real name?"

"O-of course not. I don't have the time to-…"

"Hey! Someone come torture this painful old man!"

"I do! I have time! I have more than enough time! Other than the one I'm currently working on, I completed them all on my own!"

"I see. That likely makes this a worldly desire bomb with the destructive power of a nuclear bomb. Very good ."

Sayama nodded, took a step back, and looked over the silent line of people.

"Please understand. He is merely a victim of modern Japan."

Hearing that, first the men and then everyone else formed a line and patted Ooshiro on the shoulder one by one.

"T-trying to comfort me like this is only going to hurt me further!"

"You have nothing to worry about. Now you can brazenly leap into the world of eroticism while on the job . Just place a note on your back saying you are producing bombs."

"Oh, you're right!"

Just as Ooshiro's expression brightened, Itaru grabbed his shoulder rather than patting it.

"We are having a family meeting once this is over."

Shinjou ran through the forest.

Behind her, she could hear the footsteps of Fafnir Custom that sounded like cracking stone and the footsteps of the marching 1st-Gear troops. Their advance was made clear by the sounds of falling trees and breaking stone.

As those sounds of destruction pursued her, Shinjou was accompanied by injured UCAT members.

After being chased from the remains of the base by Fafnir Custom and getting separated from Izumo and the others, Shinjou had met up with these people.

They said they were the Gram recovery team. They said no reinforcements were coming but they were going on ahead regardless.

And now they were being pursued by that white mechanical dragon.

"Ah."

Shinjou was out of breath.

She felt the weight of the Cowling Staff named Ex-St in her arms.

When she had encountered Fafnir Custom at the remains of the base, it had ultimately been Kazami who put an end to Izumo and Fafner's attacks. She had interfered from the side and deflected Fafner's pressure so it destroyed the earth's crust.

Shinjou had been unable to do anything.

She was out of breath. Her weapon felt heavy in her arms.

But she thought of the injured men running alongside her. And so she sucked in some air.

"Everyone."

Shinjou turned toward the man running next to her. This man was lending his shoulder to an injured comrade.

“I’ll draw his attacks to me. Look to the right up ahead ,” she said to him.

As they ran through the trees, a stone could be seen sticking up in the middle of the forest.

“Let’s split up behind that stone. You go hide.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! You can’t do anything on your own!”

Shinjou looked up at the man and forced a smile.

“Don’t worry. Team Leviathan will catch up soon. … They are my comrades.”

The man’s expression vanished for an instant when he heard that unit name. He then gave a troubled smile.

“That’s difficult to hear.”

“Wh-why?”

"My friend died the day before yesterday when Team Leviathan showed up too late."

Shinjou was at a loss for words. She could tell her smile had vanished.

She ran with her head hanging down and began to apologize.

"Don't say it. An apology isn't enough for me to forgive you," he said. "But those of us in the normal division rank lower than the special division. That relationship is absolute. However, if you truly want to keep it absolute, make sure to keep your word. If you will remember that, we will not forget either."

"…What won't you forget?"

"A small thing. Someone left flowers for our comrade."

Just as Shinjou heard those words, they arrived at the tree they had used as a landmark.

The men fired behind them and leaped to the right without saying a word.

Shinjou leaped to the left and turned around to check behind her. The gunshots and bullets flew toward where Fafnir Custom was felling trees and the others were taking shelter.

Shinjou was not sure if they had seen what the men had done.

But she ran all the same.

To make sure the enemy could see her, she flipped the hem of her armored uniform into the air.

The white mechanical dragon saw his prey before his eyes.

That white figure was a single girl.

That girl had been running alongside the men who had been in the lead just a moment before. The fact that she was alone now meant…

She is covering for her comrades, thought Hagen within Fafnir Custom.

He saw her spread her body out with exaggerated motions and the white of her clothing was easily visible in the darkness.

And she ran. She kept her back to him and ran deep into the forest.

Either way, she was headed the same direction they were.

Choosing her was unavoidable. As if pursuing that running prey, the mechanical dragon felled more trees and hurried forward.

“_____”

He roared. That reverberating, high-pitched, creaking noise informed his comrades behind him where they were to go.

Fafnir Custom created a path and pursued his prey. The hot armament reactor located below his neck emitted a heated wind. The Concept Core within was functioning properly.

Fafnir Custom was running well.

But, thought Hagen who had combined with the mechanical dragon. *I do not have long.*

He could move his body, but he felt a slight sensation similar to fatigue. A mechanical body was not supposed to grow tired.

Combining with a mechanical dragon was not the same as simply being inserted as a component of the machine. All of one's information was converted to writing data and synced with the machine. This was a 1st-Gear modification of the mechanical life form synchronization systems created in 5th-Gear and 3rd-Gear.

Just as writing on paper gave that paper power, a living being could be converted into writing data and added to a machine.

A deviation had appeared in that synchronization.

This deviation was caused by Hagen's writing data deteriorating over time. Even though he was inside a machine, this was the proof that he was still alive. This was a reminder to ensure he did not lose sight of himself, but it was also his weakness.

Hagen thought to himself as he listened to his advancing footsteps.

Please hurry.

This was a battlefield. The more Fafnir Custom moved, the more he would push the limits of his abilities and the greater that destructive deviation would grow. He had to resolve this while he could still move.

He thought of the holy sword Gram, of Brunhild, and of Fafner.

Please hurry. Please hurry, my enemy.

Hagen watched his enemy from within Fafnir Custom. He watched the back of that girl up ahead.

Please hurry.

I need an enemy to resolve everything.

As he thought, Fafnir Custom let out a roar. This loud voice seemed to rule over the concept space he had created.

He put all of his thoughts into this roar.

…I want to win this.

As Sayama and the others ran through the destroyed remains of the forest, they heard what sounded like the distant roar of a beast.

"That is Fafnir Custom."

Everyone tensed when they heard Siegfried's explanation. However…

"Hurry."

That was the conclusion they reached.

That group wearing clothes of white and black travelled along the moonlit path left by the dragon. Their footsteps were not in unison, their equipment was not identical, and the whistles blown by a few of them were scattered.

But they all hurried. They all moved further and further ahead.

And as they ran, a black shadow moved out of the forest to the left and into the middle of the moonlight.

"!?"

Everyone took defensive stances and stopped their hurrying feet.

The shadow before them was a human form.

This human wore a three-cornered hat and black clothes. A black cat sat on her shoulder. Kazami spoke the name of the girl who carried a long scythe.

"Brunhild Schild." With a bitter smile, she adjusted the backpack on her back. "What a coincidence. We only just saw each other around here. …Did you forget something ?"

"Yes, I did. Student council president, vice president, treasurer, and…the school librarian."

Brunhild held the scythe horizontally in both hands.

At the same moment, Izumo took a step forward and spoke in a disinterested voice.

"Let me guess, the thing you forgot was our lives."

"No. I only forgot one thing: my mercy." She was completely expressionless. "And I had just remembered where I forgot it. …I believe it was back at school."

"Well, that ain't good. I hope you wrote your name on it. With writing as pretty as mine."

Izumo laughed and Siegfried grabbed his shoulder.

"Go on ahead. And correct the comment about your writing."

"Old man, the writing comment was a joke at my own expense. You're supposed to laugh."

Siegfried gave no response to Izumo. He spoke while looking at the girl standing in the moonlight ahead of them.

"This is my fate. I cannot hand it off to anyone else."

Izumo finally began to move when he heard that.

His shoulder's drooped and he sighed. He then pushed Siegfried's hand off of his drooped shoulder.

"Old men who are into young girls tend not to live long."

Izumo gave a bitter smile and Kazami smiled back at him. Sayama nodded and looked to Ooshiro next to him.

"It sounds like you will not live long."

"Are you still stuck on that!?"

Sayama grinned bitterly, patted Siegfried's shoulder, and then held that hand up.

"Let's hurry on ahead. We have our opponent, he has his opponent, and I have my precious person."

He took a breath and they all began to move. They began to walk along a course around Brunhild.

They all gave her a parting glance, but they soon hurried toward their destination.

And just as they all left, Brunhild raised her scythe.

She held the blade up toward the night sky as if it were a partially eclipsed moon.

Below it, Brunhild looked toward Siegfried.

She moved her small lips and quietly spoke some perfectly ordinary words.

"Now, how about we get started?"

Shinjou heard giant footsteps pursuing her.

When she turned around, she could see the approaching giant white form that was snapping trees underfoot.

Shinjou cowered down a bit as she ran, but her eyebrows moved inward as she nodded resolutely.

…Yes. This is for the best.

She could not fight well, but she could do this.

She cleared her mind as she ran. This purification of her thoughts produced movement and she held up her Cowling Staff in both hands.

She ran and leaped. She twisted her body around and fired the instant she was pointed backwards.

She was targeting the legs of the white mechanical dragon approximately 100 meters behind her. This was a diversion she did not intend to hit with, but it was enough to draw his attention and stop him for a step.

That's right, thought Shinjou.

She had a way to join the fight. She could not currently think of any way but this, but she was sure of something.

"I know I too can…"

As she muttered, she landed. She turned her body around and ran forward once more.

"I too can…?"

Who was she comparing herself to?

"I too can…do what? What do I want to do?"

Suddenly, her pulse quickened. Thoughts of a certain boy floated up in her mind.

What was this?

What did it mean that she thought of him? Why had she thought of him?

As those questions ran through her mind, light spread out before her eyes.

She had come to the end of the forest.

"!"

Before her was a space with no cover. It was nothing but moonlight and a grassy plain. She saw more forest about 200 meters ahead. That forest looked pale in the moonlight and it continued on to the distant shadows of the mountain range.

The grassy plain continued as far as she could see to the left and right. The wind blew past her.

"Kh."

Shinjou ran. She ran toward the forest on the other side.

The heavy metal footsteps pursued her from behind.

"There they are! That's the recovery team that went ahead!"

Sayama and the others rescued their injured comrades from a rocky area on the way.

The surrounding area was already filled with battles against 1st-Gear.

As the initial sounds of gunfire passed by over their heads, those with nothing else to do began treating the ten or so injured men.

Ooki and Sibyl covered the wounds with the charms they had received from Chao and wrapped bandages around them. As they were being treated, the men spoke while trying to catch their breath.

"A girl who also belongs to Team Leviathan went on ahead…"

Sayama's eyebrows moved when he heard that. He looked toward the middle-aged man who seemed to be the team leader. The man nodded and began to speak as blood flowed from his head and he shut one eye.

"The holy sword Gram is located just outside this forest."

"I see," nodded Sayama.

Hearing that was enough.

He looked into the distance. Beyond the scorched areas filling the forest was their enemy. And that enemy was pursuing something.

The back of a white mechanical dragon was visible at the lead.

They were approximately 200 meters away. The trailing members of the enemy group had noticed them and begun to approach.

The mechanical dragon was moving toward an open space where the forest ended. It was a grassy plain filled with moonlight.

That would be where Shinjou was. Sayama had to break through the enemy army.

He stood up as he listened to the sounds of clashing swords, gunshots, and explosions that had begun to reverberate loudly through the area.

He was surrounded by the members of Team Leviathan. Itaru and Sf simply watched on from the back and Ooki and Sibyl worked at healing the injured. However, Izumo and Kazami stood to his left and right and Boldman stood behind him.

"Okay," said Sayama. He looked toward the approaching enemy forces. "Izumo, create a path for me."

When he heard that, Izumo finally put on a smile.

"Now we're talking! Boldman! Cover me from behind!"

Izumo pulled what looked like a single white cloth from the torn sleeve of his coat.

"With this, I'm invincible."

Shinjou fought as she fell back.

She ran along the moonlit field, spun her body around, held up her Cowling Staff, and fired. Its light was fired at the white mechanical dragon's legs 100 meters behind her.

She also had to turn her focus and attacks toward the sky.

Leaving the forest meant the soldiers of the winged races could fly up into the sky.

Their arrows of light flew in accurate straight lines toward her current location or the location she would soon be in.

The sound of the attacks resembled that of white spray .

She gasped for breath.

She fired.

That Cowling Stock labeled Ex-St on the side was Shinjou's personal weapon. It was a concept weapon that functioned by using the philosopher's stone located near

the back end. To ensure it could be used under any concepts, the front end where the attack functionality was focused could be swapped out for other parts.

…Its attack power is proportional to the strength of my intentions.

It would not create more destruction than the user wished. That was the one thing Shinjou had requested. And it was also the greatest thing holding her back. If she hesitated to attack and did not produce an effective strike , that powerful weapon was no more than a cane.

But she fired.

A scythe of light flew and struck the front right leg of the white mechanical dragon. The scythe shattered with the sound of breaking glass, but the dragon's leg was left unscathed.

In the corner of her vision, Shinjou saw a single book be ejected from the book holder on the front end of Ex-St. She had drawn out all of the power collected inside.

She had two books left.

Her ammunition was running low, but her attacks were having no effect.

Just as she regretted that fact, she saw a light in the sky .

“!”

She jumped backwards as her legs tangled together. Again and again, light stabbed into the spot she had just been standing in.

A great impact exploded out.

Dirt and scraps of grass flew into the air and covered her face and legs. And before Shinjou could find that annoying, she fired into the sky and began to take a step backwards.

However, she felt something overpowering arrive at her feet.

It was a shell fired by Fafnir Custom.

“…Kyah!”

The ground was split apart and all sound disappeared from her ears.

Her vision blacked out in an instant.

She only avoided passing out because of her fear. Her fear of losing herself quickened her pulse, caused her spine to tremble, and stopped her consciousness from sinking into darkness.

She brought herself back as if waking up. And when she did, her vision was filled with a dark blue.

…What is…?

Before she could finish her thought, her mind grew clear.

What she saw was the night sky.

It seemed she had collapsed onto the grassy ground. She could feel almost nothing with her body's senses.

A weak "ah" escaped her lips. Or at least she thought it had.

She could not hear anything.

Her mind told her she was in trouble and she hurriedly stood up. But her action held no strength. The core of her body was numb and her consciousness alone moved ahead. With horribly rough movements, she rolled to the side, placed her hands on the ground, and got up.

She stood up and her vision returned to its proper angle.

Above her was the night sky and below her was a grassy plain with a giant hole in it. That was as it should have been.

Her vision swayed to the left and right. She planted her feet in the direction she swayed and balanced herself. She gave a bitter smile in her heart as she wondered if this was what it was like to be drunk.

She looked forward where the white mechanical dragon stood 100 meters away. She had nowhere to run and she could not move her body properly.

Sound began to return to her ears. She managed to focus her eyes.

The mechanical dragon's eyes glowed red directly in front of her.

…Is it coming?

Just as she asked herself that, the white mechanical dragon, Fafnir Custom, spoke.

"I will give you five seconds. Surrender to 1st-Gear."

Chapter 27: Longing for Right and Wrong

Chapter 27

“Longing for Right and Wrong”

What is a longing heart?
It is a heart that is impatient yet waits
It is a heart containing a contradictory strength

What is a longing heart?

It is a heart that is impatient yet waits

It is a heart containing a contradictory strength

Fafner intercepted the UCAT members coming from behind.

He was not positioned behind Fafnir Custom in the grassy field. He was in the forest even further back.

That stage was more advantageous for him. He was a half-dragon whose entire black body possessed the information of “darkness”. To a certain extent, he could move freely through darkness and shadows. He could travel through them.

He charged toward the UCAT assault team that arrived first.

His enemy was a group of four people wearing white armored uniforms, but Fafner was not afraid. He used his wings to move horizontally at high speed.

As he advanced, the enemies did not hesitate to cast aside their guns and draw short swords from their waists .

While noting that they had been well trained, Fafner crashed into an arbitrary one of them.

All half dragons were at least two meters tall. Their bodies were covered in armor-like shells and wrapped in the giant muscles that allowed them to fly with their wings. By accelerating with those wings, they could produce an impact rivaling a giant stone.

Fafner slammed into the man with his left shoulder.

A great crushing sound could be heard.

That man’s body grew distorted and flew through the air. He was not even able to let out a scream.

Fafner used the recoil to kill his inertia and then he turned clockwise to the right.

A horizontal strike from a short sword came from one man to the left.

The man targeted Fafner's belly which was the weak point of his giant body, but Fafner was not worried.

He used the motion of his rightward turn to throw a roundhouse kick with his left leg. He was targeting the man's side. He targeted the same location the enemy was targeting on him.

But his rotation was not going to make it in time. The enemy's short sword was going to arrive.

In an instant, Fafner flapped his left wing forward.

Wind exploded from behind as if pushing the left half of his body forward. His body rotated at high speed as if it had been struck.

"!"

He knocked away the enemy's short sword with his left hand and slammed his left foot into his side.

The man doubled over and flew.

Instead of stopping his rotation, Fafner made a full rotation. He turned his back on his enemies for an instant

and swung his right arm backwards. A third man's face ran right into the path of that backhand.

His hand struck.

The slight vibration Fafner felt through the shell on his right fist was the sound of this man's teeth and jaw breaking.

But the fourth man targeted Fafner's body now that it had been left wide open.

The man held his short sword in both hands and ran forward as if planning to tackle the half-dragon. He held the hilt in his right hand and the bottom of the hilt with his left.

An excellent stance, thought Fafner with a nod.

Fafner looked up at the sky which was partially obstructed by the trees of the forest.

The moon was out. Fafner felt that arc of light which had not existed in 1st-Gear was in the way.

"But I will use it. As the mother of shadows, it will help us dispel our grudge."

He lowered his gaze. The fourth man had arrived directly in front of him.

Without rushing, Fafner placed his right foot down at his opponent's feet.

That was where the man cast a shadow amid the moonlight. Fafner placed his right leg up to the thigh into that shadow.

His stance moved lower than his enemy's blade. The man's eyes opened wide.

"Wha-…!?"

This is nothing worth crying out over, thought Fafner as he swung his elbow to sweep the man's feet up as he passed by.

The man rotated around in the air and collapsed to the ground. Just as his shadow disappeared, Fafner's body returned to normal.

Fafner only had to slam his heel down on top of the collapsed man to have eliminated all four.

"Are more enemies on their way?"

As he looked around with questioning eyes, he spotted movement in the forest. A group of white shadows was scattered out at a distance of approximately fifty meters. They were troubled by 1st-Gear's defensive line and could not advance further. Occasionally some people such as that group of four would make their way forward, but Fafner would swiftly intercept them.

This battle may end here, thought Fafner as he moved forward.

He was moving toward the battlefield.

And just as he did, he spotted new movement.

A single white form suddenly charged forward from the group of enemies.

Guns and spells were fired at this figure, but this did not slow its momentum. In fact, it accelerated as it charged straight toward Fafner.

…What is that?

Fafner narrowed his eyes and watched it.

It was a young man from UCAT. It was the same young man Fafner had fought in the clearing earlier. The data Fafner had seen said he was the heir to the Izumo family. He held a giant Cowling Sword in both hands as a shield.

"Hyohhh!"

He closed the gap between him and Fafner while letting out a strange cry.

Fafner's 1st-Gear comrades panicked when they realized where the young man was headed. The fired at him more and more, but it did not work for some reason.

What is going on? wondered Fafner as he placed a hand on the Cowling Sword at his waist.

This was a human opponent. He may have had an excellent physique, but he was not covered in hard shells like Fafner.

Fafner watched.

The young man's body was almost entirely covered with something. It was white and looked like armor. It was perfectly defending against their attacks. Assuming it was a new weapon, Fafner shouted to his comrades.

"Listen! Target Low-Gear's new weapon!"

And Fafner observed this approaching young man.

The new weapon he was wearing was a frilly women's apron.

The apron's chest and sleeves had large writing on them. Fafner's own knowledge was only enough to tell him it resembled Low-Gear writing, but the meaning reached his mind via an image.

The writing on the chest said "sturdy" and the writing on the sleeves said "hard".

Once he realized that, Fafner pointed at the enemy and shouted out once more.

"Target that idiot!!"

Izumo cleared the distance in the forest with tremendous speed as he ran with that impregnable defense.

Sayama and Kazami ran behind him while Boldman commanded the cover fire.

Repeated metallic noises could be heard coming from the surface of Izumo's armor.

"Who would have thought Sf-kun's apron would come in handy like this… I suppose she did say it was her combat apron."

Sayama was perfectly calm, but Kazami's eyebrows drooped.

"Um," she began. "A-are you okay, Kaku!? I hear a lot of harsh impacts!"

"Wa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

"It is no use, Kazami. He is taking so much gunfire it is rattling his brain. Once this happens, he will never recover…"

"There are some jokes you shouldn't make!!"

Just as Kazami began strangling Sayama as they ran, an explosion struck Izumo directly.

“!”

Sparks, an explosive noise, and an explosion of air came afterwards.

A spray of metallic noises burst out as the apron was smashed to pieces.

The shockwave created a white ring of water vapor around Izumo that burst out in every direction. However …

“That ain’t gonna cut it! Battlefield cooks are invincible !!”

Izumo’s body was unharmed.

He had lost the apron, but the armored uniform below it had writing as well.

The words “very sturdy” had been written upside down in magic marker.

"Looks like reducing the number of moving parts was worth it!"

Izumo charged forward. His armored uniform had grown even harder, so it did not have the softness needed to move. However, he was still plenty fast when moving in a straight line. He shouted toward the underclassman he saw approaching out of the corner of his eye.

"Go, Sayama! Go where you have to go!"

They cleared the forest. Fifty meters ahead was a white mechanical dragon.

That dragon was at least thirty meters long and its back was to them. Izumo charged forward without hesitation.

"V-Sw! Second Form!" shouted Izumo as he ran.

He twisted his upper body backwards.

He squeezed the button on his Cowling Sword's grip.

The back of V-Sw's thick blade opened up. The armor plate sank down and a linear thruster appeared.

At the same time, V-Sw's blade changed form. The cowling forming the blade was stowed away as if it had come apart. Pure light appeared as if slowly rising out from the gap.

Izumo poured strength into his grip on the sword.

V-Sw contained 6th-Gear's Concept Core. It was a combination of an energy weapon named Vajra and an energy entity named Vritra. It had to be used with care. He only opened it up to attack in emergencies.

And Izumo knew that this qualified.

I can do this, thought Izumo as he tightly clenched the grip.

As if in response, the sword's will spoke on V-Sw's console.

"Our prey is there."

In the next instant, an explosion of light occurred behind V-Sw.

It was a jet used to propel the sword.

Using the twist of Izumo's body as an axis, that very thick blade of light targeted the mechanical dragon while accelerating quickly.

It should have been a direct hit.

However, that high pressure blade was obstructed by something and it was deflected through the air with a great roar.

"…!?"

Izumo rotated his body to the right by using V-Sw as a fulcrum as it swung horizontally.

He leaped about five meters to the right while remaining parallel to the forest.

He looked toward the location he had just been in. His shadow still remained there.

"A half-dragon that can pass through shadows!"

A giant black body stood in the moonlit field. His winged form was surrounded by black shells, skin, and clothes.

"Fafner!"

Fafner the half-dragon held his Cowling Sword while standing up from the shadow.

"Perfect. I was hoping for an opponent to keep things interesting."

Sayama and the others did not turn back toward Izumo and Fafner who had moved off to the side.

The continued running on and on. A giant mass stood fifty meters ahead of them.

That white mechanical dragon was easily thirty meters long and seven meters tall. It was walking forward at about the same speed as they were running.

They had to hurry.

Sayama quickened his pace and let out a breath. 1st-Gear's winged unit was quickly dropping down toward them.

Seeing those approaching shadows in the sky, Sayama spoke to Kazami behind him.

"Enemies are coming from above. Please cover for me."

"Why do I have to?"

"During the battle at the Imperial Palace, you came down from the sky, didn't you? And you attacked from the sky when fighting that giant knight earlier. …Kazami, you have the power to live up to your name, do you not?"[3]

Sayama watched the movements of the flying enemies as he spoke.

Kazami's response came after a short delay. It came in the form of a question to confirm something.

"Sayama. …You understand, don't you? Right now, you are trying to reach the peak of this battle. Are you

prepared? Are you prepared to lose something and to take something from someone else?"

"Are you?"

"I…have shot an enemy and driven them to suicide. That is something you and she have not done. The battlefield is not a kind place."

"I see." Sayama sucked in some air and spoke. "Is that why you left flowers by his remains? Is that also why you did so every day?"

"!"

Kazami's presence stiffened behind Sayama.

"D-don't be ridiculous! I didn't leave any flowers!"

"The chrysanthemums left for the werewolf had a horizontal scrape across the stem. If you had the flowers sticking out of your rucksack while transporting them, the zipper would scrape them like that."

Sayama lowered his body down and charged further forward. Without turning around, he gave one last request.

"Kazami, please cover for me."

Kazami slowed her pace. She clenched her back teeth, brought her eyebrows together, and stopped running.

"Kh."

She ground her teeth together and looked up into the sky.

She was about thirty meters from Fafnir Custom. If she slowed down, she could not catch up to the giant dragon moving ahead of her.

She took a breath and stopped altogether.

She could see the winged soldiers gathering in a formation in the air. Their bows were targeting Sayama who had run ahead.

Kazami looked down. There she saw the light of the console on G-Sp2, the Cowling Lance in her right arm.

"Kazami? Are you not feeling well?"

After looking at that display for a while, she closed her eyes. She forcibly opened her mouth while still clenching her teeth.

“Why do boys insist on showing off?”

“Because it is cool.”

“Thanks for the valuable input.”

Kazami sighed and raised her head.

The ends of her eyebrows rose to their proper position and strength entered her eyes.

She looked into the sky. The enemy forces were here, but Kazami looked beyond those wings flying through the sky.

She looked at the moon.

While staring up at that pale arc of light, Kazami opened her mouth.

“X-Wi!” she shouted and a noise came from her back.

It was a metallic noise. At the same moment, words scrolled across her wristwatch.

—Light is power.

As if in response to those words, light grew from the backpack she wore.

A flapping noise was heard.

That cry that blew the air away was accompanied by the appearance of yellow wings of light. They began as an emission but came together in a solid form in the next instant. Two sharply angular wings of light with an effective range of two meters stabbed up toward the heavens.

That light sliced through the wind, created an emission of light, and sucked in the wind.

The light filled with a tension of power and emitted a high-pitched noise.

As the moonlight washed over the wings of light, the sound grew even higher pitched and ultimately exceeded the audible range.

Wind appeared behind her.

“…!”

Kazami gathered strength in her back.

The pressure of her shoulder blades told X-Wi in her backpack what its job was.

And that job was to flap.

The wings beat at the air.

With a sound similar to an explosion, the wind roared at Kazami’s back.

She leapt high into the sky.

Kazami danced up into the air with a trajectory suggesting she had been shot upwards rather than jumped.

By the time she took in another breath, her vision saw nothing but the sky. She had reached the moonlight.

The winged enemies below her had lost sight of her and were confused.

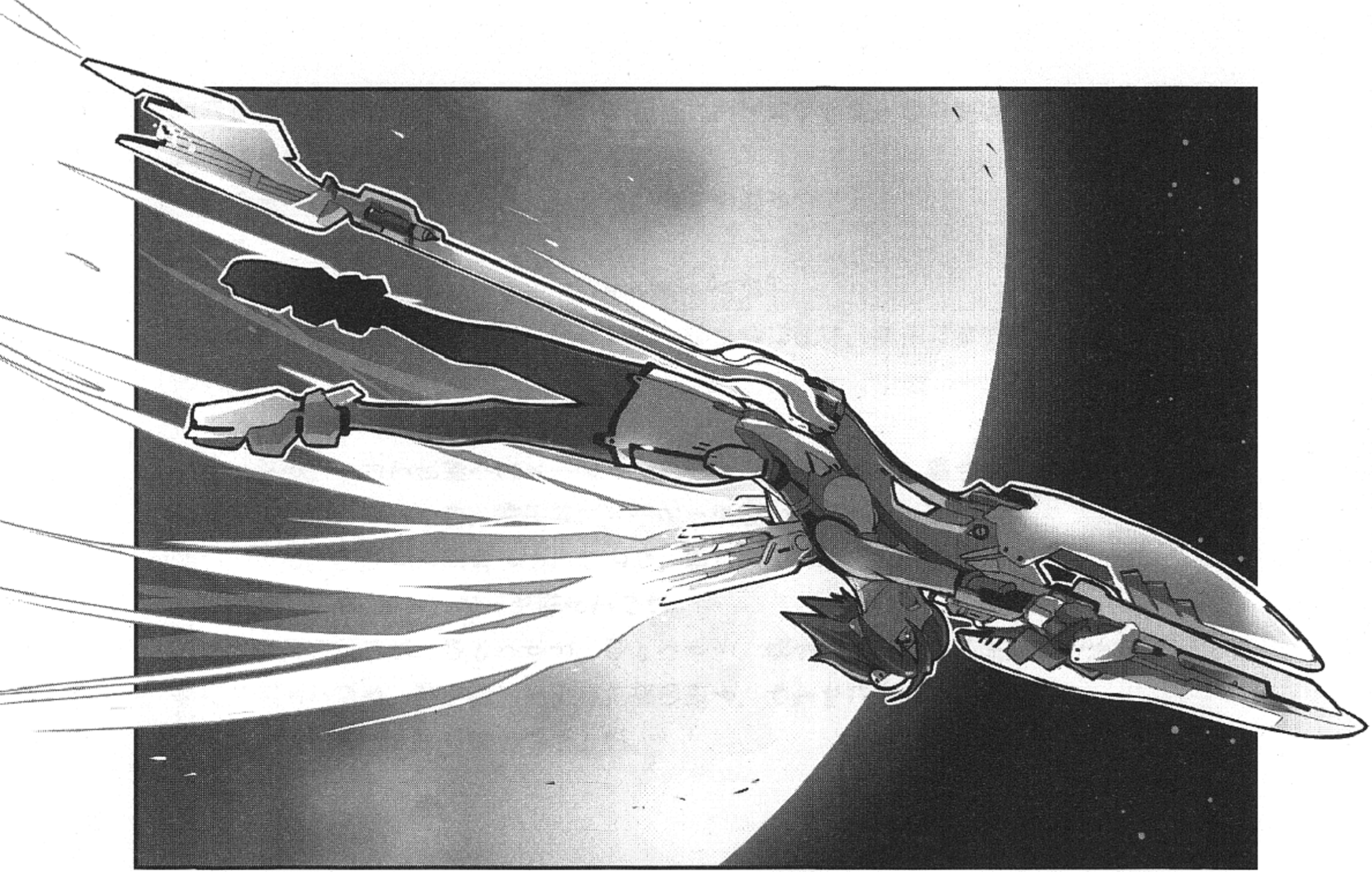
Kazami checked to make sure the wings on her back had spread out. And then she rotated herself upside down in midair. She oriented her head downwards, pointed G-Sp2 toward the surface, and removed the long, narrow shield on her left wrist.

The action took a single instant. Kazami attached the shield along the bottom edge of the spear's tip. And just as the shield covered up the blade…

"G-Sp2! Go to your second form!"

As she spoke, the Cowling Lance transformed.

First, the curved back of the handle rose up. Next, the grip stuck out from the base of the tip to the left of the console. At the same time, the cowling on the butt of the spear opened and a heat ejection point stuck out.



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And finally, white light appeared deep in the dragon's maw-like split between the cowling of the tip and the shield attached to the bottom. That visible commotion of light was the true form of G-Sp2 contained within the cowling.

The spear was a large rifle.

"10th-Gear's holy spear Gungnir. It's a bit impressive compared to your bows and arrows."

Kazami held the curving handle under her right arm and grasped the grip with her left hand.

She placed her finger on the trigger. She already knew exactly who her enemy was.

She could see the moon below her feet in her upside-down vision.

She smiled.

And while smiling, she flapped her wings. She flew straight down.

Shinjou gave no response to Fafnir Custom.

She trembled. Her legs trembled. Her teeth chattered slightly

But she moved. Slowly, very slowly, she sank down and reached a hand toward her feet.

Her Cowling Staff, Ex-St, had fallen there.

From what she could see, it had not bent or broken. When she touched it, she felt the chill of the metal.

Shinjou embraced Ex-St as if taking in that chill.

She stood up and weakly aimed Ex-St. That was her answer. It was her definite answer.

And a voice arrived from directly in front of her.

“Why?” asked Fafnir Custom as he stopped walking.

Shinjou shook her head at his calm tone of voice.

“I think you all are simply wrong.”

And so…

"I will not accept defeat against someone who is wrong like that."

What am I saying? wondered Shinjou.

She had nowhere to run. A single strike from the dragon would be enough to kill her even if he held back. However…

…I am not despairing.

She felt meaning in the words she had spoken.

Fafnir Custom lowered his body.

"Is that so?" he said. "I do not see how we could be wrong. We are simply trying to take back what is ours."

Shinjou glimpsed his main cannon in his mouth. Light had already appeared deep in the round muzzle.

Fafnir Custom spoke a number.

"Five."

Shinjou knew what that number meant, but she could not run. She spread her legs as wide as her shoulder width and faced the dragon.

She recalled certain memories: the final expression of that werewolf, the remains of her comrades, and…

A single boy.

"I…" began Shinjou. "I know someone who is truly wrong. I know someone who attacks others and lives on. "

Shinjou recalled the back he had shown her. She recalled that stance as he prepared to fight. But…

"He is different from you. He…knows that he is wrong . And that scares him. It scares him so much he is willing to stifle himself."

For some reason, she drew excess power from her body.

"Four."

She continued speaking.

"He wants to be wrong. Unlike you. He thinks what it would be like if he was right, but he does not want to be right. And when comparing himself to me…"

She took a breath.

"He said I am right."

Her words were rooted in the depths of her memories.

"Three."

Shinjou thought about him and about herself.

"You all are wrong. You are wrong and in the wrong way. Unlike him. He tries to be wrong in the right way. And that is why I will not accept defeat against you!"

A small "ahh" leaked out of her mouth.

"Two."

She had to choose whether to pour strength into her fingers or not.

"His way of being wrong is the only one I will allow! And…"

Shinjou told herself to fight. Just as he desired the battlefield, she too had to desire it.

She had to be with him. She had to do more than just watch his back.

She was not choosing presented options or being given a course of action. She would be here because she personally desired it.

She had a perfectly good reason: she would be his opposite.

“And I will wield my power while remaining right!!”

“One.”

Using that spoken number as her sign, she squeezed the trigger with all her might.

As light shot from her staff, Fafnir Custom let out a cry .

“Zero! Your attempts are futile!”

The mechanical dragon’s main cannon fired light.

A giant light flew silently. The line of light Shinjou fired struck that light of writing which possessed the weight of mass. It pierced through the center of the thick light and bore a hole through it.

A clear sound rang out.

The front of the dragon's blast swelled and expanded like an umbrella. It exploded.

The dragon's attack had been destroyed, but that was all Shinjou had managed.

The mechanical dragon let out a roar that reverberated throughout the heavens and the earth. He fired a second blast.

"…!"

The second shot of dragon light swallowed up Shinjou 's attack and instantly doubled in size.

Shinjou saw the light expand before Fafnir Custom's eyes and continue toward her.

The massive light flew toward her in a slight arc.

Shinjou stood in its path, but she did not falter. She clenched her teeth and stared straight forward.

That mass of power was trying to destroy her. The silhouette of the mechanical dragon was visible beyond it .

“_____!”

She shouted someone’s name.

And then that person appeared before her eyes.

That person’s back entered in between Shinjou and the light.

He took something from his pocket and threw it toward Fafnir Custom. It looked like a rectangular case.

Immediately afterwards, he slowly turned toward her.

He was a boy with sharp eyes and Baku sitting on his shoulder. His mouth moved amid the roar of the dragon’ s approaching light.

"I missed you, Shinjou-kun."

He took her in his arms, wrapped them around her, and embraced her.

Shinjou did not hesitate to wrap her arms around him and embrace him.

In the next moment, a gigantic explosion occurred in the space between them and Fafnir Custom.

Chapter 28: Their Confirmation

Chapter 28

“Their Confirmation”

That is something very valuable
Unavoidably valuable
Incredibly valuable

That is something very valuable

Unavoidably valuable

Incredibly valuable

What Sayama had thrown was an internal hard disk for a laptop computer.

A single phrase was written on the surface in black paint: localized bomb.

When he threw that hard disk as hard as he could, it of course flew through the air. When it struck the light fired by Fafnir Custom, it was closer to the dragon than Sayama and Shinjou.

An explosion was created five meters above the ground and twenty meters in front of Fafnir Custom.

It began with a light.

The grass of the plain undulated as if struck by that light.

And then everything burst apart.

The impact and the destruction split the night apart and created a great noise.

The light was power. The sound was pressure. The wind blew and washed away everything.

The power produced at the center of the explosion had a set 5 meter radius of destruction.

The light roasted the air, but it accelerated and spread out as it rose. The afterimage of it all was blasted into the wind, the earth, and the clouds in the sky.

Fafnir Custom was swallowed up by white light and vanished.

There was a great roar.

But the true sound came afterwards.

It was a white bubbling sound. The sound of everything in range being fried was carried by the wind and flew up into the air. The sound and the wind accelerated and torn pieces of grass danced through the air.

The clouds visible in the moonlight vanished and that rising sound and wind created a low noise when they struck the inner wall of the concept space.

Everything blasted up into the sky and a reverberation spread out from there.

Amid the earth and wind blowing through the trees of the forest, both UCAT and 1st-Gear got down on the ground and watched the destruction.

Ooki and Sibyl saw Ooshiro Kazuo take a step forward next to them.

Amid the roaring noise and wind, Ooshiro reached out his hands as if to grab something.

“Miyokooooo!!”

And…

“Sachiko, Emi, Sachi, Nanae, Hanako, Jane, Ellie, and Resolution Girl Lundgren!!”

"You mustn't go there, Ooshiro-san! You can't bring them back!"

Ooki and Sibyl held Ooshiro back. As the noise disappeared into the sky, Ooshiro hung his head down and cried.

"That's rough," said Itaru as he walked up. He brushed away some pieces of grass raining down from above. "Well, he was probably lonely. Miyoko is the name of my dead mother…"

"I see. So that's why he would always play those games late into the night," said Sibyl.

"Yes," replied Itaru with a sigh. And with a serious expression, he added, "But I won't forgive him."

In the forest where Siegfried and Brunhild exchanged attacks, they perceived the explosion from the light and wind it produced.

The trees around them shook and a great light lit them from the side.

Brunhild glanced over toward the grassy plain for an instant.

What had happened? She knew the answer, but had to focus on the enemy before her eyes.

She looked forward once more and focused on the tall figure running next to the trees.

It was Siegfried.

When faced with him, Brunhild swung the scythe without letting the flowing trees distract her.

She cut space itself. A bluish-white bow and arrow stuck out from beyond the bluish-white light that opened .

A two meter archer made of light held the bow and arrow. The shot he fired immediately became multiple arrows that flew toward the target. The arrows of light weaved through the trees, produced a wind, and flew at high speed.

In response, Siegfried spread pieces of paper out in both his hands. Those memo-like white rectangles had a single word written on them: Schild.

Siegfried threw those papers into the air and they came to a stop around him. The arrows then struck the papers.

Repeated high-pitched sounds exploded out and Siegfried was wrapped in light.

But he was unharmed. He swept away the light and continued running.

In response, Brunhild ran after him and thought.

…Why?

That was the question she had asked herself so many times over the past sixty years. That was the question that had grown within her over the past few days. That was the question she would never receive an answer to without asking him directly.

…Why?

It had all begun there and that was where it would end . But Brunhild could no longer ask with words.

Why? she asked by swinging the scythe.

Why? she asked by producing the spirit of a warrior.

Why? she asked by attacking.

Why? she asked all the harder.

Why? Why had had things turned out like that? Why had he done that? Why had things turned out like this? Why? Why?

Her thoughts produced actions and her attacks grew more rapid as her questions accelerated.

She ran, jumped, approached, fell back, and threw the power of the question "why?" at him.

She thought of that small bird which could not fly. She thought of that injured bird.

She thought of the school. She thought of her birthplace.

She thought of those important to her, of herself, of having her head rubbed, and of what she had lost.

She thought of everything and asked "why?"

They left the forest.

Even as they entered that moonlit field with the wind blowing across it, the two of them continued to run.

Why?

Brunhild hung her head down and swung the scythe.

She thought. She thought of everything and of the question she had for it all. Why?

Why could she not get an answer? And she thought of the people who should have given the answer. She thought of everyone, the birds, the forest, the wind, and the sky.

“Why did it all have to be destroyed!?” cried Brunhild as she swung the scythe.

Her legs brought her across the field and into the next forest.

Sayama wondered why he was here.

He could see a vast stone hall that was fifty meters square. The roof was around twenty meters from the floor. It reminded Sayama of some kind of hangar, but he also wondered where exactly he was.

He remembered embracing Shinjou and being blown away by an explosive blast.

In his wisdom, he had intended to immediately stand up, lift Shinjou up, and receive a word of thanks. However, when he looked down to see Shinjou in his arms, he realized he had no body.

Only his sight existed, so this had to be the past.

He looked around and realized the walls of the hall were cracked and shaking. An intermittent vertical shaking ran through the building.

And a battle was being played out in the center of that shaking.

The battle was between the white mechanical dragon known as Fafnir and a young man.

The stage of this battle was the stone altar in the center of the hall. Pieces of white stone were scattered atop that

platform of identically colored stone. And a gray-haired old man in black clothes was collapsed below that stone. A golden decoration had fallen next to his head, but he was no longer moving.

The only movement came from the young man and Fafnir.

Fafnir swung his upper body as if trying to climb on top of the white altar.

His clawed right front foot swung forward.

The young man stood atop the altar as the mechanical dragon's claws approached. He had his back turned to Sayama, but he was wearing black clothes and held a sword almost two meters long.

He was Siegfried.

He tried to swing the sword upwards from the right.

He could not avoid Fafnir's attack from his position.

While prepared to receive the dragon's strike, he had made his way up to the dragon and targeted his throat.

"!"

Sayama thought he saw Fafnir's claws strike Siegfried.

But they had not.

Siegfried took a step back, but it was not an attempt to evade. He had been pushed back.

Sayama had been unable to see it before, but a woman stood in front of Siegfried. This woman who wore crimson clothing was Gutrune.

She leaned against Siegfried and collapsed. A single giant claw mark was visible along the front of her body. It looked similar to a cut from a large sword.

Gutrune collapsed atop the altar. She rolled on her side and stopped moving.

What is this? thought Sayama.

A voice cried out as if to answer him.

It was the mechanical dragon.

As if it had realized something, that white mechanical dragon suddenly turned its head toward the ceiling and roared.

It was a great “gah” sound. That voice that could be taken as surprise or grief reverberated throughout the entire room. The hall shook. The rumbling of this cry joined the already existing shaking and loosened the bonds of the stonework.

The ceiling began to fall.

And below it, Siegfried took a new action.

He swung the large sword and pierced the giant dragon’s throat.

It was a single strike.

The sound of the slice erased all of the vibrations.

All that remained was movement.

The armored panels and moving parts making up Fafnir's throat were smashed to pieces. The newly made opening left Fafnir's core exposed. This was the reactor within his throat.

The sword was stabbed halfway inside it.

The reactor could no longer function.

"_____"

Amid the surrounding vibration, Siegfried pulled out the sword with a suppressed breath.

Just as the sword's blade was exposed, Fafnir's body lost all power.

The metal front legs fell, the jaw fell, and the entire body collapsed to the floor while smashing the altar.

The stone of the ceiling continued to fall.

The shaking continued.

And Siegfried kneeled down.

He placed the sword by his side, and reached for Gutrune who was collapsed at his feet.

He picked her up and embraced her.

And as he did, Fafnir spoke from where he had collapsed on the floor.

“Is it over?”

“You regained consciousness?” asked Siegfried as he placed a hand on Gutrune’s belly.

“Yes. It seems I caused you a fair bit of trouble, Siegfried. Did the holy sword Gram serve its purpose?”

Fafnir’s primary vision devices used their red light to look at the sword Gram at Siegfied’s feet before turning toward Siegfried himself. He removed his red-stained hand from Gutrune and looked at it.

The color staining his hand caused him to grimace.

Fafnir said, “The king began sealing off this world and it was already heading toward destruction. I thought this was my only choice. I tried to neutralize the out-of-control Concept Core inside my reactor.”

"But the Concept Core produced a rejection reaction. Was its output too great while out of control?"

Fafnir nodded.

Siegfried sighed and looked toward Gutrune in his hands.

"She took that blow for me…"

"Siegfried, can you take the princess with you? If you take her to your Gear, you might be able to save her."

Siegfried began to nod.

But then something touched his cheek.

Sayama watched as nothing but vision. While Siegfried embraced her, Gutrune reached her bloody hand out toward him.

"No," she said. The shaking coming from the floor would occasionally bring a bitter look to her face. "Hey, Siegfried. Will your Gear accept us?"

He nodded and she smiled.

"Then I need to tell everyone that. That is my duty. You go ahead. Take Gram and create land we can live in."

"But," said Siegfried.

Fafnir stood up.

The mechanical dragon swayed weakly but still looked at Siegfried.

"Please go. If you do not steal our power, nothing of this world will remain. Due to the king's guidance, 1st-Gear is currently sealing itself off by eternally shrinking. The concepts have been normalized now, but the world has already gone too far in the negative direction. It can no longer be stopped. This world is done for."

Fafnir turned toward the top of the altar. An old man was collapsed there and buried below stone. The mechanical dragon hung his head.

"This is our job. …Now, go. I will watch over the king to the end. That is the least I can do as a traitor."

Siegfried nodded and turned to Gutrune in his arms.

That woman with red hair closed her eyes while smiling.

Siegfried placed his lips on hers.

A few seconds passed.

After he moved away, Gutrune opened her eyes and nodded. She stood up and propped herself up against the altar.

“There is a gate deep in the royal palace. Wait on the other side. Set the exit to a location important to you.” Gutrune smiled. “Wait there. I am sure everyone will be able to be together once more.”

Siegfried stood up and nodded.

He looked over and realized the light had left the eyes of the white mechanical dragon.

Siegfried gave a bow and parted ways with that dragon.

And with Gram in hand, he turned his back to Gutrune.

"Tell them I destroyed 1st-Gear. Tell them the king, the wise man, and you fought valiantly for 1st-Gear, but were defeated."

"But that is a lie. …My father destroyed this world. And all so he would not be hurt anymore."

"But if you tell them that, the people of your Gear will have been betrayed by their ruler," said Siegfried. " Gutrune, you fulfill your role as a member of the royal family and I will fulfill my role as the invader. You three lost to me and I escaped with Gram. …I will prepare a 1st-Gear reservation for those who accept defeat. And those who cannot accept defeat can hate me and pursue me."

"And you think that will allow most of 1st-Gear to evacuate?" A bitter laugh rang out. "Go, Siegfried, you foolish invader and hypocritical foreigner. …I always hated you."

"And I you," he replied as he began to walk away.

His walk became a run and his black-clad form disappeared into a staircase.

The great hall continued to crumble. Amid it all, Gutrune sighed, moved from the altar, and began to walk.

She placed a hand on the king's face. His face was thin and his eyes were closed as if sleeping.

Gutrune placed her left hand on her stomach and climbed down from the altar.

She leaned up against the giant dragon's collapsed body as she walked out of the hall.

As Sayama watched her, he heard a song.

He recognized it. It was the hymn Silent Night.

Her back moved away. She walked and grew more distant.

The ceiling slowly bent and finally completely collapsed.

Sayama awoke from the past.

"…"

For an instant, he did not know where he was.

It was a small moonlit clearing a short distance into the forest. The trees were rustling in the wind and the air was hot. Sayama determined not much time had passed since the explosion.

After being blown away in the blast, he was lying on his side in the underbrush while embracing someone.

In the center of his vision, a familiar face looked up at him in his left arm.

It was Shinjou.

The ends of her eyebrows were lowered slightly and confusion could be seen in her black eyes.

"Thank you," she said in reference to something. " H-hey, did you see that?"

She had seen it, too. He nodded and Baku hopped over to her shoulder. He then nodded in reference to the images of the past they had seen.

"That was the truth," muttered Sayama before looking behind him.

Something he had seen in the past was there. An almost two meter sword was stabbing into the ground.

"So those memories were yours, holy sword Gram."

In response, a small light ran across the sword's surface. It looked like a pulse. The sword looked alive.

And they then heard a voice.

"Yes, I am Gram. Only Gram. I have done nothing worthy of the title 'holy sword'." It paused for a beat. " This year, I turned 60 in Low-Gear years, but I have spent most of that time asleep."

Amid the moonlight and the windy forest, two figures were in a tree near a cliff.

They were both girls.

The first was a tall girl with black hair bound in the back. She lay atop a thick branch with her legs crossed.

She wore a black summer coat over a thick black shirt and brown slacks.

On the branch below her was a long-haired girl sitting with her legs together. She had a black stole over her shoulders and her slightly swaying legs were almost entirely hidden by a long black skirt.

The higher girl looked toward the forest. She watched the sparks and explosions bursting in that deep darkness. She also listened to the noises.

"Now, then. Which side do you think will win, Shino?"

The girl called Shino twisted her neck upwards and showed a bitter smile to the other girl.

"I do not know. …Are you curious, stepsister Mikoku?"

"No, not really. I am sure our stepfather Hajji already knows how this will end. There is nothing the information broker Hajji does not know."

"True, but the Leviathan Road has begun, hasn't it?" Shino heard an explosion. "Wow! This has gotten flashy. "

"This is likely the end for the City faction. Fafnir Custom's lifespan is running out. …Sixty years is a long time."

"Yes," agreed Shino as she swung her legs.

Mikoku closed her eyes as she felt the vibration coming through the tree trunk.

"That song again, Shino?"

"Yes. There was another explosion, right? When I hear the tones of gunfire, I feel like I am going to lose myself."

"The more you come to places like this, the more out-of-place tones you hear in your head."

"Yes," agreed Shino as she muttered a portion of the hymn playing in her heart. "All's asleep, one sole light, just the faithful and holy pair."

Mikoku nodded with her eyes still closed. She crossed her arms even further.

"Silent Night. …The holy child is born tonight, hm?"

Below the moonlight, Sayama stood while holding Shinjou. He grabbed Gram's hilt with his right hand and pulled it from the ground.

"You are light…"

"I am almost entirely hollow inside. However, the interior construction has had its area expanded seven thousand times by the writing. Most of that is filled with hardening and sealing words."

"I see."

Sayama lifted Gram up in his right arm and tried swinging it.

It sliced through the surrounding heat and produced a whistling noise. It seemed to weigh three kilograms and that weight was evenly distributed. He had called it light

before, but Sayama realized he was wrong. It was well balanced. It felt as if the sword's center of gravity was changing within his hand. It felt so easy to use, he was sure he could use it no matter how he swung it.

Sayama carried Gram in his right hand and looked to Shinjou who he held in his left arm.

Shinjou was looking up at him. When their gazes met, she quickly looked down.

"Y-you managed to retrieve Gram."

"Why are you averting your gaze?"

"Eh? Oh, um… Did you hear what I said to Fafnir Custom earlier?"

"No, not at all," honestly answered Sayama.

"Oh. If you say that, Sayama-kun, then you must have heard…"

"Shinjou-kun, it seems you are somehow mistaken about me."

Sayama tilted his head and heard a voice from his right hand.

“Sayama and Shinjou?”

It was Gram. Sayama’s eyebrows moved when he heard that low voice. Shinjou also looked down at it. As did Baku.

But before they could say anything, Gram spoke.

“This world is governed by Low-Gear, correct?”

Sayama nodded. It seemed Gram had indeed been sleeping.

That meant they needed a common understanding of the situation. With that in mind, Sayama opened his mouth.

“Yes. Currently, we have begun postwar negotiations with the survivors of the other Gears.”

“I see,” said Gram. “So during my nineteen years of sleep, the world has decided to apologize.”

"Nineteen? Are you sure you do not mean sixty years? I thought that was when you were put to sleep…"

"I cannot answer that. I made a promise to the one who woke me," said Gram. "You said your names are Sayama and Shinjou, did you not? …What do you want from here on? Do you seek the past you do not know?"

Sayama felt a slight squeezing in the left side of his chest at that question.

If he continued with the Leviathan Road, he would end up facing the past which had created that pain.

But Sayama said, "What I want is pain. And the meaning of that pain."

"Do you mean you will not deny the ending of the Gears carried out by your ancestors? You will not deny all that which began with the evil committed by my brief master, Siegfried?"

I suppose it does, thought Sayama silently.

He would learn of the past of his family in the form of pain, but that was something he had to learn. After all…

…That is where I can get serious.

He did not need permission from anyone. He wished to be in that place himself. And so he nodded.

"Yes. I will not deny it or reject it. That is what I want."

"I see. Then listen, boy bearing the surname Sayama." The sword paused for a moment. "Boy, you are a collection of ignorance who still knows nothing and has been told nothing. Prepare yourself. If you wish for me here, you will doubt yourself in the future. You will learn you are the descendants of great criminals."

"…Great criminals?"

"The meaning of that is something you must desire and obtain for yourself."

"What an irresponsible thing to say."

"If you desire it to a cruel extent, it will save you. So do not force the duty of answering onto me. This is my belief as a resident of 1st-Gear which holds the concepts of writing: writing was created from a desire to leave behind what is in one's heart. …This is the same. If you

desire it in your heart and want to give it form, then take action."

"If I win here tonight, do you think I will receive my answer to this pain?"

"Yes," said Gram. "Your pain related to 1st-Gear will disappear. However…"

"However?"

"You will only see a portion of it. It will only be the beginning. Prepare yourself. Once you stand at the entrance, you cannot back out until you have seen it all to the end. You will see the development of history that began with us," he paused, "and ends with that girl. You will see the history of how everything came to an end. You will see the ending chronicle."

"Shinjou-kun…? Why?"

"She is the key that binds it all together. …You will learn why so long as you continue to fight."

Through the arm holding Shinjou, Sayama could feel her gulp.

And Sayama realized he had gulped at the exact same moment.

“What will you do, boy? Do you still wish for this!? Do you still wish to use me to cut away the pain of 1st-Gear!? If you truly wish for this, I will become your holy sword!”

As the sword spoke, Sayama saw movement on the battlefield.

Through the forest in the center of the field, the wind blew away a shimmering in the air.

And where that shaking of the atmosphere disappeared, a giant form became visible.

“That is…”

Fafnir Custom.

The weapons on his surface were gone, but the primary armor panels where unscathed as that white mechanical dragon stood up. The heat exhaust points across his body were fully open. Steam and a shimmering of the air rose from every part of his body.

The white mechanical dragon prepared himself for battle. The defensive shutters over his red eyes opened and he stared straight forward. His gaze was likely fixed on Gram in Sayama's right hand.

I see, thought Sayama. *That is the first opponent of my pain and my first target to get serious against.*

And so Sayama opened his mouth. He turned toward the girl in his arm.

"Shinjou-kun."

He took a breath. He recalled his grandfather's words and spoke.

"I think I will try becoming a villain."

Shinjou raised her head within Sayama's arm.

She saw his sharp eyes narrow slightly as they looked down at her.

She asked him a question to confirm what he meant.

"You mean…like Siegfried-san?"

She received silence as an answer. He said nothing but still looked at her.

Shinjou felt her heart beat and trembled slightly.

"Are you going to do it no matter what?"

That was what he desired. She knew that. What she had told Fafnir Custom earlier was definitely true. However, when he said it directly to her, it produced more words from her.

"I don't want you to take all the blame onto yourself."

"But I am wrong and that is what I wish to do."

"But…!"

As Shinjou raised her voice, Sayama lightly tapped her waist.

He seemed to be telling her to calm down and she blushed.

Shinjou looked up at Sayama. Their gazes met. He looked away as if conflicted.

This was the first time she had seen him do this, so she felt a bit confused and tilted her head.

And he spoke.

"Then…will you come with me, Shinjou-kun?"

Shinjou could not react to the words of the boy before her eyes.

She knew what he meant. She simply wanted to hear more of his words and to be absolutely sure.

And so she asked, "What do you mean?"

Sayama frowned and looked back at her.

"You are right and I am wrong. So…I want to have you with me."

"…"

Shinjou was at a loss for words. Sayama gently released her body.

After moving back a bit, Sayama stretched out his left hand which was covered in black armor.

He said nothing more.

It was now her turn to answer. She wanted to give a frank answer to his roundabout manner of speaking. She smiled and grabbed his hand.

“So do I,” she answered simply. “So do I!”

And then they both turned toward their opponent. They turned toward the white mechanical dragon taking an offensive stance in the middle of the grassy plain.

Meanwhile, Fafnir Custom was using all of his senses were he stood in that field with the dirt exposed.

Something felt off about his entire body. That sensation could be seen as a premonition or a warning.

When he received the visual information of his mechanical sight, he felt a deviation between himself and Fafnir Custom.

That deviation advanced with time and signified his demise.

That deviation created a gap in his consciousness.

His body had withstood the damage of that blast. However, his consciousness was beginning to waver.

Please hurry, thought Hagen.

He was no longer consciously operating the machine. Attitude control and visual correction were being carried out based on his past actions and the records that were recorded within Fafnir Custom.

Straight ahead in the center of his vision, two figures stood in a forest clearing.

They were a boy and a girl wearing white uniforms. The boy stood next to the girl and moved Gram to his left hand.

The girl picked up her staff which had fallen nearby and held it in her right hand.

They were the ones who wanted to resolve everything.

That girl who had tried to come up with an answer had not been alone after all.

…I want to win.

Hagen nodded in his heart. He hurriedly interfered with Fafnir Custom's movements with his own will. He optimized the various actions being taken based on his memories and records.

He made sure that giant white body could act at maximum effectiveness when the time came.

He fully opened the cooling systems. He let the lubricant for the moving parts flow freely.

He used the full output of the operation reactor and the weaponry reactor.

And he released all of the weapons.

He determined it would take five minutes before it would all be ready, but Hagen did not care.

He let the machine take a step forward.

Chapter 29: The Dragon's Contract

Chapter 29

“The Dragon’s Contract”

Move
To ask
Is to oppose those who will not give an answer

Move

To ask

Is to oppose those who will not give an answer

Izumo crossed swords with Fafner in the forest.

"Honestly, why do I have to waste my time fighting you?"

He swung his large light-emitting sword toward Fafner.

Just before the blade of light struck, the black half-dragon dissolved into the shadows of the trees and disappeared.

Immediately afterwards, Izumo felt a disturbance in the air behind him and he leaped.

He leaped forward.

With a single footstep in the grass, he jumped about four meters forward. The instant his foot landed, he sent a strike toward the shadow behind him as if turning around.

Before the sword arrived, the giant black form disappeared into the shadows once more.

"Damn," muttered Izumo.

He ran, hoping to find somewhere without shadows, but he was in the forest. No matter where he went, there were shadows at arm's length.

To the right, he heard someone treading on a stone.

"!"

Izumo swung V-Sw to the right.

At the same moment, writing appeared on V-Sw's console.

"Wrong."

Izumo looked and saw nothing to the right.

Then what had that footstep been?

V-Sw sliced through empty air and the light leaking from its blade illuminated the area. That bluish-white light showed a fist-sized stone on the ground.

Fafner had rolled it here. He had most likely done it as a decoy just before sinking into the shadows.

Izumo clenched his teeth.

He had already attacked and missed. It was now his opponent's turn.

He had to evade. Right, left, front, and back. Izumo had several options and he chose one:

Down.

He threw himself to the ground as if letting V-Sw's swing pull him down.

The instant his jaw struck the grassy ground, a mass of high pressure swept by overhead. It was Fafner's Cowling Sword.

That spherical power struck the trees to the left and they exploded. A total of twelve trees were destroyed all at once. A pit was created in the forest and the fibrous sound of the trees snapping rang out.

Izumo got up.

However, a kick struck his gut. The blow had skimmed the ground and shot up at the last second.

By the time he felt the pain, his body was already flying through the air.

"…!"

As he flew to the side, Izumo stuck a foot against the ground and gained control. He took two long strides and stopped his momentum by pressing his back against a thick tree.

Before he could catch his breath, he heard a roaring of air behind him.

"Oh!" he cried as he jumped to the left.

He turned around and saw Fafner swinging his Cowling Sword horizontally from the shadows behind the tree trunk Izumo had been leaning up against. The shimmering surrounding the sword sliced through the trunk at Izumo's waist level and blasted the air upwards.

The tree fell.

Scattered leaves flew about below the moonlight with a sound like a receding wave.

As the leaves fell like snow, Izumo moved back. He faced Fafner.

They were four paces part. Izumo would need to take a step before his attack would reach. Also, the bottom half of the sliced tree trunk remained between them. It was an obstacle for Izumo, but it meant nothing to the half-dragon who could travel through shadows.

Izumo let out a breath and Fafner lowered the tip of his Cowling Sword.

"Are you giving up, descendent of 10th-Gear and Low-Gear?"

"Oh? I'm surprised you know that."

"Knowing one's enemy is only natural. …But why do you fight for Low-Gear? From what I have heard, you should be fighting for 10th-Gear."

"Why would you think that? Tell me what it is you've heard."

Fafner paused for a beat before answering.

"Supposedly, your defensive divine protection was given to you when your mother died. It is your divine protection as a descendent of the gods of 10th-Gear."

"You're well informed. But I think there's one thing you don't know."

"What?"

"You don't know why people are given that divine protection." He smiled bitterly. "Divine protection is not passed down with the bloodline or anything. …It's meant to let you leave that family."

As he spoke, Izumo pointed the tip of V-Sw toward Fafner. With a smile on his lips, he looked toward the destroyed trees in the surrounding area.

"I will swing this Cowling Sword once. …And then I will win."

Fafner took a defensive stance.

And at the same time, a voice rang out. That distant voice came from the grassy plain beyond the forest.

As that voice filled the wind, travelled a great distance, and soared through the sky, they heard it.

Izumo knew who it belonged to.

It was Sayama.

Sayama's voice sounded strongly throughout the concept space which had become a battlefield.

"Everyone!"

He began by addressing the people there. And Izumo heard his words continue.

Sayama spoke the words only he could.

"Let me say it here. …The surname Sayama indicates a villain!"

Boldman and the other members of UCAT who had begun a firefight within the forest heard a voice cutting through the trees. Sayama's voice also came from the communicators on their necks.

"After sixty years, the true negotiations will take place here."

As she wrote healing charms in the shadow of a tree, Ooki raised her head to listen.

"Listen, everyone! Prepare yourself for battle! Fill your magazines and blades with questions of condemnation and fill your armor with voices of protest. Expressing your thoughts with those is how we will negotiate tonight. …Listen up, everyone!"

As she performed maintenance on an overheated rifle, Sibyl listened the sound coming from her communicator.

"Ahead, ahead, go ahead! These people are trying to return to the past! Grab them by the collar and drag them here!"

As she flew just under the upper wall of the concept space, Kazami heard a voice rising up toward her.

"I, Sayama Mikoto, use my authority as the representative of Team Leviathan to make this announcement. The Leviathan Road begins here. We will not give in to any power. We are right and we are wrong. And…we will see this through to the very end!" He took a breath. "This is my first order: all members are to bring them here even if you have knock them out to do so. Bring them to a world where these words will get through to them. Kick those reclusive writers out of the darkness where they are bound by writing!"

Kazami looked down at the winged soldiers moving toward her.

Standing on the grassy plain were a white mechanical dragon surrounded by shimmering heat and a boy and girl wearing white armored uniforms.

The boy held up a sword, took a breath, and asked a question.

"Where is your answer?"

Kazami opened her mouth.

She gave a single answer.

The ends of her eyebrows rose and she smiled.

"Testament!"

As Sayama faced Fafnir Custom on that grassy field, he heard the responses to his will.

Testament.

In the forest, in the wind, and in the sky, dozens of voices replied with that holy word.

Tes. Tes. Tes. We bind a contract here.

As those numerous contracts washed over him, Sayama walked forward.

He stared at the white mechanical dragon before him, sped up his pace, and accelerated. The girl lined up next to him.

They ran forward.

Fafnir Custom also ran.

The color white approached. The ground rumbled and a great roar was heard. And with that before him, Sayama turned to Shinjou. She nodded with a powerful expression while holding her Cowling Staff in hand. She was saying, "Let's go."

In lieu of saying Testament, Sayama nodded back. He looked at Gram in his left hand. A green light ran through the metal plate added to the surface of the blade. Writing appeared there.

He could not read that writing, but he understood what it meant. It said power.

Sayama poured his true strength into his left arm. He felt pain, but that proved this was real. Sayama swung up Gram, placed his right hand on the hilt, and swung it down.

The mechanical dragon had already arrived close enough.

It struck.

With a sound like shattering glass, a white armor plate flew into the night sky.

The mechanical dragon's body slid to the side and the air moved.

The battle truly began.

As Izumo listened to the distant sounds of battle, he muttered as if to himself.

"V-Sw, don't go to your third form. Let's go like this."

"Are you ready to go?"

"Of course," replied Izumo as he held V-Sw up at stomach height.

He held the blade horizontally and leaned forward. The light from V-Sw's rear thruster grew stronger.

But Fafner did not move from his position directly in front of Izumo. He lowered his hips a bit, but did not take a defensive stance.

"What is it, half-dragon?"

"So you plan to use the acceleration of that sword's thruster to attack before I can pass through the shadows?"

Izumo frowned.

Fafner filled the silence with his voice.

"I am a fighter, too. You announced your attack just now, so I will announce mine as well. I will avoid your initial strike and take your head from behind." Fafner nodded. "The victory you predicted will not come."

"Is that so?"

Izumo prepared himself by lowering his hips and taking a breath.

And then he moved.

"!"

It was just a single strike.

Izumo threw his body forward and swung V-Sw horizontally. He swung it toward Fafner.

There was an explosion.

White light shot from the back of the blade. It accelerated at the same moment.

The afterimage of the light drew a giant arc and the sword picked up more speed.

It moved at high speed, swept up the wind, sliced through the air, and flew as the light grew even stronger.

"Go!"

That low horizontal strike was meant to reach Fafner even in the final moments of trying to escape below.

As it approached, Fafner sank down.

Izumo was impressed.

…This idiot really intends to do this seriously.

He twisted his body while giving a small whistle. The follow-through motion of his body accelerated further and Izumo pressed the trigger on the grip.

An additional light was produced. And this time it came from the blade side. This white light far surpassed the quantity and quality of the accelerating light coming from the back of the blade. This light blasted forward.

This was a giant blade of light. The giant sword extended more than ten meters.

The acceleration from the back of V-Sw's second form was not meant to drive the blade into an opponent. It was meant to counteract the recoil of this strike. Nevertheless, all the strength in Izumo's body was necessary to swing the blade now.

Izumo twisted his entire body and shouted while swinging the sword forward.

"Aaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!!"

But in the forest which could be clearly seen in black and white due to V-Sw's blade, he saw Fafner's wings swing up and then down.

He heard a roar.

The half-dragon accelerated downwards into the shadow of the torn tree trunk.

In that instant, V-Sw's blade of light sliced through Fafner.

However, it was too late. Only a portion of the half-dragon was sliced off: his wings.

Those black wings were severed at the base and flew through the air. His body of shadow disappeared down below.

He had escaped into the darkness.

"…!"

Izumo continued swinging V-Sw as if trying to slice through the air.

Fafner felt pain stabbing into his back, but he knew he had won.

He quickly ascended in the darkness. It felt similar to swimming.

He could not see outside from the darkness. Inside, there was nothing but darkness. To leave was to give his body physical form once more.

But he had a certain level of freedom such as in the distance he travelled.

Fafner recalled the promise he had made. He had promised to appear behind his enemy.

That enemy would be swinging his large Cowling Sword and working to control his stance.

After swinging that heavy weapon, he could not immediately stop it.

Fafner had won. This boy born between 10th-Gear and Low-Gear had brought 6th-Gear under Low-Gear's control two years prior and he held that Gear's Concept Core. Fafner felt the loss of his wings was a small price to pay for defeating a foe such as that.

Fafner ascended. He was targeting that enemy's back. He would appear from the shadows of the trees. This

forest was puny compared to 1st-Gear's forests, but it would serve as a stage to defeat this enemy.

He exited.

Fafner jumped from the shadow and to the surface.

He heard silence. While surrounded by the remains of the shadow, he rose into the air and looked forward.

And he found nothing at all.

The forest had disappeared. The forest that created his precious darkness was gone.

Fafner gasped.

"!?"

The forest was gone. The back of his enemy was not before his eyes.

This isn't right, thought Fafner as the moonlight washed over his back. *What happened?*

He looked around and saw what was so wrong. That area had definitely been a forest.

However, all of the trees within ten meters had been felled at the height of Fafner's waist. The cut was sharp, but the trees above the cut had been blown into the distance where they had struck the surrounding trees.

The area was now a clearing.

And Fafner saw something in one corner of the clearing.

A giant Cowling Sword lay on the ground. This was the enemy's sword which was labeled V-Sw on the side. It had lost all light and the cowling had closed. At the base of the sword, words appeared on a console.

"This is fun."

Once he read those words of enjoyment, Fafner realized something.

He realized that he had his back to the moonlight.

He looked at his feet. There was a shadow there.

In the middle of that supposedly empty clearing was someone's shadow. The moonlight to his back had created that shadow.

Who was casting that shadow?

It would be the person who had swung the Cowling Sword and cut down all the surrounding trees Fafner could use to escape.

It would be the person who had cast aside the Cowling Sword he could not stop in time and who had turned his back to the moon.

Fafner heard a voice from behind him.

"Turn around."

Fafner gnashed his teeth and…

"Oh…!!"

He spun his body with his Cowling Sword in hand. He attacked behind him at high speed while ignoring the pain in his back.

A single young man stood there.

Before Fafner's sword could reach him, his right fist slammed into the half-dragon. The blow struck the tip of his angular jaw. That was the best place to send vibrations through to rattle his brain.

Before he could speak, breathe, or even feel the impact, everything turned black.

Brunhild heard the sound of different attacks.

From nearby, she heard repeated noises of metal clashing.

From far away, she heard continuing gunfire and clashing swords.

It had all started and accelerated with Sayama's words.

…The current situation is…

She did not know. She had her hands full pursuing her opponent.

Siegfried would occasionally attack. He targeted the ground at her feet and trees along her path to slow her down or stall her.

How cowardly, thought Brunhild. *Why won't he fight me seriously?*

She felt as if he were evading her questions.

…He is trying to buy time until the other battles are over.

From the point of view of the Leviathan Road, they could ignore their connection and treat this as just one of many battles. Whichever side won, all of the battles would need to be stopped.

Brunhild clenched her teeth and wondered if he could not tell how seriously she was taking this.

"Is this also part of your atonement?"

He did not want to hurt her.

Brunhild looked forward as she ran.

Approximately ten meters ahead of her, the forest came to an end and a grassy field opened up.

She decided to end this there.

She stopped attacking and began her preparations.

She gathered strength in the hand holding Requiem Sense.

As she ran between the trees and created loud footsteps, Brunhild rested the scythe on her shoulder.

She pointed the tip of the blade toward the sky. And she made up her mind. She was only ten meters and a few paces away from the field. She used that distance, speed, and hesitation to open the entire underworld.

She ran through the forest and passed by Siegfried.

She made it ahead of him for the first time. As Siegfried looked outside the forest, he shouted something at her.

But she could not hear it.

Brunhild hung her head down and charged out into the field.

"_____"

The moonlight felt bright.

She treaded on the grass and heard a damp footstep. But what she heard even more clearly was the sound of Requiem Sense slicing through the wind by her ear.

Brunhild took action. As if bending her body over, she swung the blade forward and down from her shoulder.

"Open, gate of the abyss! Open wide here where one can look up into the heavens!" she shouted while the blade stabbed down into the ground.

At the same moment, light appeared behind her shoulders and above his head. The light took the form of a rift.

As she followed a portion of the light with her eyes, Brunhild continued to speak.

"Come forth, wielder of the scythe!!"

By the time she turned around, it had already appeared.

A grim reaper about a dozen meters tall was wrapped in a cloak of bluish-white light and wore an undecorated mask. It was impossible to tell if the face behind that blank mask belonged to a man or a woman or if they were elderly or young. Death was impartial to all.

This was the crystallization of the power contained within 1st-Gear's underworld. This grim reaper of enmity held a giant scythe in its hands and swung it down.

The blade flew toward Siegfried.

As he ran out of the forest, he prepared to receive the blade as if being struck by a counter. This attack had much more mass than the previous ones. He could not receive it so easily.

And so Brunhild assumed Siegfried had to be surprised.

But what she actually saw was different.

Siegfried's eyebrows rose and he shouted toward her.

"Nein!"

Brunhild raised her head at his scolding tone and looked up.

And she realized something: she was not being lit by the moonlight.

"…!"

She turned around and found a giant mass of white.

It was Fafnir Custom.

As the mechanical dragon fought, he had ended up moving toward her.

The auxiliary vision devices installed on his body noticed her and glowed red.

A roar rang out so loud it sounded like the earth's crust being smashed.

At the same time, the mechanical dragon's entire body worked to brake.

But the impact travelling through the ground and the wind blowing through the air both assaulted Brunhild. Her footing grew unsteady, her body was scooped up, and she flew through the air. She was thrown toward the forest and toward Siegfried.

Just as she realized she had been blown through the air , she noticed the grim reaper floating in the night sky.

The blade it swung down was going to strike her as she flew by.

It came. That almost 10 meter blade swung down to cut through everything in its path. She would be sliced in two.

"!"

Just as she thought she would die, someone suddenly grabbed her waist from the side.

…Eh?

Before she could wonder what had happened, her vision rotated around. Her body was flung to the side with great strength.

She flew through the air.

And then her right shoulder struck the grass.

She felt pain and was confused as to what had happened, but she asked another question first.

"Why!?"

Brunhild placed her arms in the grass and got up.

She forcefully raised her head and looked forward. A tall figure wearing black stood in the path of the grim reaper's rotating scythe.

It was Siegfried.

He stood facing the hand that had swung down toward him.

And she saw his face.

A clear smile could be seen in his sharp eyes and the connected corners of his mouth.

The tip of the scythe reached his left hand.

Brunhild watched the point of the attack she had sent and watched his smile. She opened her mouth but the word "why" would no longer come. The word that came directly from her heart was…

"No!" she cried. "No!!!"

And as she shouted, Brunhild saw it.

She saw the answer to her words.

After exchanging attacks with Fafnir Custom, Shinjou saw it.

Just before the grim reaper's scythe brought death to Siegfried, it stopped in midair.

"…Ah."

That tall man in black stood in the field. The giant bluish-white blade had stopped one meter to his right. It had been stopped by a woman standing between him and the blade.

That woman was tall enough to reach Siegfried's shoulders.

She had her back to Shinjou and she was the same slightly transparent bluish-white as the grim reaper.

This woman had come from the underworld. Shinjou knew her name.

The giant dragon facing her spoke that name quietly.

"…Princess Gutrune."

She turned toward them. She let go of the blade and turned her entire body toward them.

The grim reaper and its blade disappeared above her head. After seeing that, Gutrune looked toward them. Below her soft-looking hair, her eyes bent and a smile appeared on her lips.

With that soft smile, a royal of a ruined world quietly looked at them all.

She looked at the soldiers in the forest, the winged races in the sky, and the white mechanical dragon in the field.

After looking around at all of them, she made an action as a member of the royal family.

She gave a quiet bow.

Shinjou could only stand there dumbfounded, but she heard a single voice. It came from the main in black standing next to Gutrune. That old man lowered his arms , clenched his fists, and trembled as he spoke.

"Why…?" He took a breath. "Why did you save me again!?"

Gutrune did not turn toward him. She merely lowered the ends of her eyebrows and nodded while still smiling.

And then it ended.

The princess's body scattered into bits of light and dissolved into the scythe blade stabbing into the ground.

No one moved.

The wind washed over the field and the shadows of the grass shook in the moonlight.

But a single quiet and high-pitched noise could be heard.

It was the chirping of a bird.

Brunhild looked over. She looked over at Siegfried's pocket as he hung his head down.

A small bird's head poked out.

"_____"

The bird looked up at the moonlight and tilted its head .

It chirped quietly, moved from the pocket, and stood up on Siegfried's collar.

And it looked at her. It spread its wings, flapped them, and flew toward her.

It was an unskilled flight that was more a glide than anything and it only lasted a few meters.

However, the bird arrived at her shoulder almost instantly and landed on the black cloth there. It hopped up, changed direction, and peered at her wide-open eyes below the three-cornered heat.

"Ah…"

A small voice escaped Brunhild's mouth and a small black shadow stood before her.

It was the black cat.

His yellow eyes looked up at her face and the small bird on her shoulder. Finally, he opened his mouth.

"Brunhild… What do you want right now?"

Brunhild was unable to answer.

She hung her head down, placed her hands on her face , opened her mouth wide, and let out a voice.

She cried out with a loud, loud voice.

She cried and continued to cry.

Hagen nodded within Fafnir Custom.

He did not know the truth of 1st-Gear's destruction.

But Gutrune had bowed when she appeared via Requiem Sense.

That was all that mattered.

He was surrounded only by the sound of wind. Everyone had stopped moving.

Is it over? wondered Hagen.

The discomfort within him had grown stronger and more distinct.

Was it going to end here?

No, denied Hagen within Fafnir Custom.

Like this, it would all return to how it was.

…I cannot let this have such an uncertain ending.

There was something he needed to gain. This was something he could only gain by facing his enemy and settling this.

This was something they had lost when 1st-Gear was destroyed and that they had been unable to pass on to Fafner and the others.

Without that, it would all end up the same as before.

But this battlefield was done for and his body was reaching its end.

Was it hopeless?

Hagen lowered his primary vision devices slightly and looked forward.

A single boy stood there. The holy sword Gram hung down from his left hand. He was the one in charge of the Leviathan Road.

He looked up at Hagen.

His eyebrows were raised and his lips were held closed. He held Gram tightly and would not let go. His feet were spread wider than his shoulders, his hips were lowered, and he waited. He waited for Hagen to act.

He was waiting.

"…"

Hagen definitely saw him and he asked a question to the boy.

"A conclusion reached through emotions can be overturned when one forgets one's emotions. Is that what you think?

"Yes," said the boy with a nod.

Hagen nodded using Fafnir Custom's body.

"Boy, if you win, you will change this world. In a way, that will mean destroying this world. Are you prepared to do that?"

Before the boy could respond, Hagen spat out further words.

"Think carefully before answering. An insincere answer and an insincere contract are not worthy of destroying the world. What is needed is trust worthy of destroying the world. Do you understand? That is what it means to be sincere."

"I do understand. The word sincerity is a heart like the sun formed from words.[4] …And I will show you that here."

A stir ran through everyone there. The girl standing next to the boy gave a look of surprise. She spoke a question to the boy and Hagen knew why.

...Girl, that is because you are right.

And…

…I want to win.

While continuing to look toward Hagen, the boy spoke to the girl.

"Please come with me, Shinjou-kun."

And then he turned his straightforward words toward Hagen.

"I saw the past, I will fight in the present, and I am sure the future is with us. In that case, we should be thinking the same thing."

"Then let me say one thing: Make sure not to alter what you gain here or go against that promise. Youth who takes on the role of the villain, can you promise me you will resolve everything here?"

"Testament!"

As the boy shouted out that word, Fafnir Custom began to move.

Chapter 30: Inheritance of the Dragon's Will

Chapter 30

“Inheritance of the Dragon’s Will”

Words are a voice
A voice rings out
It asks to drive the response in here

Words are a voice

A voice rings out

It asks to drive the response in here

When Fafner left the forest which had become a clearing and entered the grassy field, he saw the white mechanical dragon and a boy and girl fighting as if dancing.

Those steel footsteps tore at the earth's crust and that giant body whipped up the wind. Sounds of metal clashing rang out. As those figures moved in the moonlight, Fafner's 1st-Gear comrades and the UCAT members watched on from a distance.

Everyone was standing petrified without speaking a word.

Fafner trembled at the pain in his back, but continued walking forward through the active wind and opened his mouth.

"Why!" He stared directly at the white mechanical dragon. "Lord Hagen! You been avoiding battle, so why?"

Intense pain ran through his back. Fafner fell to his knees as it felt like his spine was being squeezed.

And a figure stood up next to him.

He looked up to find a familiar face.

It was a black half-dragon just like him. This figure also had no wings on his back.

"Father…"

"It looks I made it in time. My son Fafner, look at Lord Hagen."

Fafner did so.

He watched that white dragon run at high speed, twist his body around, blast dirt into the air, and roar.

A low voice spoke from above his head as he kneeled down.

"That is what you wanted, Fafner. That is what you have been waiting for."

Hagen's heart moved within Fafnir Custom.

The deviation from before had disappeared. He knew why: he was beginning to disappear.

With the excess gone, he had been sharpened to the extreme.

He felt the wind on his skin and smelled the scent of the grass.

He felt the dirt between his toes and his claws throwing small stones as he moved.

All of his body's movements were perfectly synced with the machine.

The adjustments from before had paid off. His will fit perfectly into the machine and there was no waste.

He moved.

He extended his claws and pursued the boy. He expanded his armor panels and defended against the girl 's attacks.

The boy targeted his neck. The two reactors were located there. He likely wanted the Concept Core in the weaponry reactor in front, but the only way to do that was to take his life.

On the other hand, the girl targeted his vision devices, legs, and joints. However, these attacks were not on the level of the earlier one that had intercepted a blast from his main cannon.

I see, thought Hagen. *So you still do not fully know your role in this battle. But you can only find that answer from there, girl.*

Hagen laughed.

"Ha."

The voice escaped. It had been a long, long time since he laughed like that. He did not think he had ever used his full voice since taking on this body. He had not felt this happy in a long, long time. He was fighting so that everyone could laugh once this was over.

He wanted to win.

As he looked around in amusement, he saw everyone there. They had all come with him.

And now he was fighting where they could not follow. This was something he had to do. Only someone close to the royal family who had been given the greatest attack power in 1st-Gear could do this.

Hagen remembered.

King Wotan had been timid but kind. Hagen's younger brother Regin had been quick to lecture people but had done it for their sake. Hagen had loved how Princess Gutrune was dauntless yet often suffered for it. And that world had existed alongside all of them.

He may have lost everything, but he knew all of that was true.

"!"

Hagen took in his full range of vision.

He saw the field, the forest, the mountains, the sky, the clouds, and the moon in the center of the heavens.

…Yes.

Once this battle ended, he would have to leave this space.

…It has been so long.

Before him were enemies who could choose to be wrong in the right way and right in a mistaken way.

This enemy moved. The boy held up the large sword and leaped to Hagen's left. The girl fired a scythe of light toward Hagen's right leg.

It struck. The ground below his right leg crumbled and his posture was thrown off.

His body tilted to the right and the left of his throat and his left side were exposed to his enemy.

The boy came in to take advantage of this opening, but that was a mistake. Fafnir Custom had a cannon installed within. This cannon had shot through the swordsman

girl named Mikoku when the information broker Hajji had brought her to that abandoned schoolyard.

Hagen expanded that cannon, wondering if he could win with this.

He fired.

He did not target his enemy; he targeted the holy sword Gram the enemy held.

"!"

He fired three times at close range.

The shockwaves produced a white umbrella of steam and the splitting of the air blew the boy away. He ended up directly in front of Fafnir Custom. That position allowed Hagen to politely let loose his maximum firepower.

Fafnir Custom's vision devices checked on the results of his attack. The holy sword Gram in his enemy's hand had lost its light. The metal plate that words should have appeared on was silent. Gram's voice rang out.

"Four seconds until recovery! Throw me away and run !"

…That long? I only need one second.

Hagen operated Fafnir Custom. He opened his mouth and braced himself with his four legs.

His enemy had almost let go of Gram during the impact and he turned toward the girl behind him.

This is the end, thought Hagen.

With enjoyment in his heart, he fired his main cannon with a single thought.

…I want to win.

Sayama gathered strength in his body which was trembling from the earlier impact. He could feel the earth below his feet, so his left arm came next.

Gram was there. The two meter sword was currently silent.

But, thought Sayama. *I must finish this using this weapon . That is only polite.*

"…!"

He gathered strength in his trembling left arm.

Immediately afterwards, he felt intense pain. Blood flowed from the bandage on that arm as if bursting out. He could distinctly feel his muscles and tendons.

But he did not care. Pain was real. The pain throbbing throughout his body showed him his body existed.

His senses had returned.

His sense of touch, hearing, and vision returned and he focused on what lay before his eyes. Fafnir Custom had opened his mouth.

Light could be seen in the muzzle visible deep in his throat.

There was no way Sayama could avoid this.

And so Sayama did not choose what to do. He simply desired victory.

Just as he tried to move forward, someone nestled up next to him as if propping him up.

It was Shinjou.

"Leave the things you can't do to me," she said.

And as she spoke, she moved her hand. In an instant, she took the blood flowing from his left arm onto her fingers and wrote something on Gram's metal plate.

She wrote "holy sword".

At the same time, the main cannon fired. Sayama swung the holy sword Gram toward that light that had actual mass.

"…!"

He used all of his strength. That which he desired was here.

He smiled. He smiled from the bottom of his heart. And as he did, his left arm felt a light impact.

"!?"

Sayama looked down at Georgius on his left hand. The plus sign medallion on its black surface was emitting a white light.

As if in response, Gram let out a roar. Green light ran across the blade's surface.

"What is that gauntlet!?" asked Gram.

"I do not know! But it is the power I have inherited!!"

Sayama swung down the holy sword Gram.

The metal blade sliced apart the dragon's attack. He heard the surging sound of light being sliced and scattered. And at the front, Sayama forcibly twisted the sword upwards, moved it around behind him, and moved further forward.

The distance grew to almost nothing in an instant.

He charged toward Fafnir Custom's throat.

He swung a diagonal strike similar to a horizontal swing. It was a single blow.

Gram was wrapped in light. At the peak of its arc, it would sever the weaponry reactor in the throat. At the end of its arc, it would target the operation reactor at the base of the neck. That was Sayama's style of fighting. He would completely neutralize his enemy.

But a strike came from behind to stop him.

It was an attack of light.

Just as Gram arrived at Fafnir Custom's throat and he felt it break the metal of the armor and the outer core of the weaponry reactor, a thin beam of light came from behind and passed right by him.

That beam pierced and blew away Fafnir Custom's front right leg.

With a clear noise, Fafnir Custom crumbled to the ground. It looked like he was lying down or bowing down.

The dragon's movement sealed off Gram's trajectory. As he fell to the ground, the components within his neck distorted and bit into Gram.

The holy sword's cutting action was hindered by the mechanical parts that pressed together like praying hands.

Sayama perceived this resistance in the form of a metallic noise, but he continued swinging Gram.

"_____"

He swung his arm, continued forward, and made his way out on the other side of Fafnir Custom's throat.

He looked at his hand. The bloody Georgius on his left hand was not holding anything.

He understood.

He had robbed the mechanical dragon of its power, but the dragon's throat had stolen the holy sword Gram from his hand.

And that resolution was the conclusion.

Sayama looked behind him.

In the moonlight, Fafnir Custom was getting back to his feet.

However, with his front right leg gone, he could no longer move enough for combat.

Fafnir Custom slowly looked up into the sky and bent his body upwards.

The stolen sword was indeed sticking out of his throat.

The white of his armor and the black of the sword created a silhouette in the moonlight and cast a shadow.

In the darkness he himself created, the mechanical dragon looked up at the moon with his red eyes.

Fafnir Custom's mouth opened. His throat had been pierced, but he opened his fang-filled maw as if to devour the moon.

It was not a bestial cry that escaped through those metal fangs. Instead, he called for someone.

"Boy." That quiet voice continued to ask the question in the dragon's heart. "Was 1st-Gear a formidable enemy ?"

Sayama regulated his breathing and clenched his lowered left fist. He squeezed his own blood and opened his mouth.

"Is there any other kind?"

As he answered, Sayama watched the silhouette of the dragon in the moonlight.

He waited for the dragon's reply.

However, he received no response.

He heard a song carried by the wind. A 1st-Gear girl sang the song. One line reached his ears.

"Schlafe in himmlischer Ruh."

Suddenly, Shinjou approached from his left side. She treaded softly on the grass and said "Hey."

Sayama could tell her voice was trembling. The hand she wrapped around his left arm was trembling as well. And so he wrapped his arm around her waist to check on her.

He embraced Shinjou's slender body and drew her in closer, but he kept his eyes raised. He continued watching the silhouette of the mechanical dragon in the moon.

There was no longer any light in the mechanical dragon's eyes.

Two girls sighed while atop tree branches in the forest.

The short one, Shino, sang the song she heard coming from the field.

The one sitting on the higher branch, Mikoku, smiled bitterly.

"And with that, the Leviathan Road has begun."

She jumped down. She easily landed after the four meter drop. She waited for Shino to finish singing and then held her arm upwards. Shino did not hesitate to jump down into Mikoku's chest.

"You have gotten heavier," said Mikoku as Shino glanced at her from the side and moved away.

Shino tilted her head slightly and then looked behind her.

"Shall we leave now, Tatsumi-san?"

In response, a woman appeared from the darkness of the forest.

She was tall. Mikoku was tall as well, but this woman was even taller. Her long hair swayed as it flowed backwards and she wore a brown sweater and a long white tight skirt. On her feet were…

"I am not sure you should be wearing sandals, Tatsumi."

"I managed to get this close without being noticed, didn't I?"

The woman named Tatsumi looked at the two girls with drooping eyes and a smile with no hint of sarcasm.

"So how was it?"

"Not bad. Shinjou can act now and Izumo and his partner should be useful enough. Sayama… Sayama Mikoto obtained Georgius."

As Mikoku spoke, she turned her back on the field. The speed with which she turned caused Shino's shoulders to jump a bit, but Tatsumi took Shino's hand to stop her from trembling.

"Let's go home. This concept space is growing thin. Everything will arrive at its conclusion and this place will return to normal. But Mikoku, how was Georgius? Even we have almost no information on that concept weapon."

"I do not know. I saw a bit of a strange power, but…"

"But?"

"Georgius is the Latin name of St. George who slayed a dragon. But that was thought to be a fictional story, so his sainthood was revoked in the 15th century." Mikoku gave a bitter smile and spoke as she walked through the darkness of the forest. "A false saint. That is an appropriate name for a concept weapon of Low-Gear."

Final Chapter: Lineage of Pride

Final Chapter

“Lineage of Pride”

You remember some words
For some reason, you cannot forget those words
Those words have been drilled into you

End.

You remember some words

For some reason, you cannot forget those words

Those words have been drilled into you

Spring break was coming to an end.

Sayama stood below the midday sky on the emergency staircase on the second floor of the second year general school building.

Cherry blossoms were blooming everywhere he looked in the schoolyard below.

The flower petals fell and danced about. That told him a gentle wind was blowing.

The cherry blossoms looked like blowing snow.

The roads and gravel paths the petals fell on were being used by students walking back to their dorms.

They wore casual clothes and were excited to see each other once more. They ran about to check on their textbooks for their new classes or to prepare their means of inviting new members to their clubs at the entrance ceremony the next day.

Amid them all, Sayama spotted two familiar faces. Those people discussing something as representatives of the athletic clubs were Izumo and Kazami. They both wore casual clothes. They held a single plastic bag for miscellaneous items.

Kazami noticed Sayama and looked up.

She…

“_____”

She only smiled and looked away without saying anything.

Sayama raised his left hand in greeting, but that was it.

And he looked at that raised hand. His left arm had a new bandage wrapped around it. The middle finger had his mother’s ring on it.

A scar was visible on the back of the hand and he felt a phantom pain when clenching the fist.

And merely thinking of the past would squeeze at the left side of his chest.

…What happened to the people of 1st-Gear after that?

Gram had absorbed the rest of the Concept Core from Fafnir Custom and Sayama had been told it was stored beneath Japanese UCAT. It would next be brought out when all of the concepts were being released.

Currently, the half-dragons and other races that would have difficulty surviving without the concepts were settling in at the 1st-Gear reservation. Various numbers were being calculated out related to its maintenance and expansion. Once the results were in, the actual expansion of the reservation and encouragement toward naturalization would begin.

There had been damages during the battle and the responsible parties would be charged for those crimes, but Hagen had taken most of that onto himself. As long as no major rehabilitation was needed…

"They can make it up by fully cooperating with us."

Amid all this work, Fasolt was trying to begin producing paper within the reservation. They would not have it shipped in to them. They would create their own records.

Sayama wondered if his son, the half-dragon named Fafner, would eventually follow his father down that path.

Their history and pride was no longer passed down orally. This change of medium would allow it to spread much wider.

The words Sayama had exchanged with that dragon would be passed on in the background of reality.

And Sayama…

"…"

He had decided to always fight seriously from here on.

He thought about the battles to come that would surely be recorded by someone. He thought of his opponents and his comrades.

He looked up into the sky and his thoughts finally turned toward that white mechanical dragon.

…Did my words reach him?

He suddenly looked down from the sky and behind him.

There was a wall to the side of the emergency exit. The sand of the schoolyard had washed over it and hardened from the wind and rain.

He reached out his left hand and touched it.

Sayama wrote a few words with flowing writing.

He wrote “1st-Gear – Fafnir Custom”

“How sentimental,” he muttered with no smile in his voice.

He removed his finger from the wall, took a step back, and sighed.

Just as he did, footsteps rang from the emergency staircase.

He looked down and saw long hair swaying as someone walked up the stairs.

It was Shinjou Setsu.

Perhaps because of the springtime weather, he wore a white short-sleeve shirt and brown shorts. He held a small box. He looked up and walked next to Sayama with a smile.

"So this is where you were. I was looking for you."

"What is it? No, what is in that box?"

"Well," said Shinjou as he placed his elbow on the railing and opened the box.

The box contained two small shortcakes. Shinjou gave a small smile and looked up at Sayama's eyes from below.

"This is to celebrate me moving in. …Sayama-kun, you seem to have been busy since your wound worsened and then you came back. H-here. I know it's late, but don't you think this kind of thing is important?"

A celebration, hm? thought Sayama. *Come to think of it, perhaps we should celebrate 1st-Gear joining with UCAT.*

Yes.

There were things yet to be dealt with and imprudent comments would likely be made.

But it was spring around them. The wheat in the field of 1st-Gear's reservation would be growing nicely and the flowers would be blooming brightly. Spring was an excellent season for celebrations.

After thinking through all that, Sayama smiled bitterly. He thought it was about time he got back to his life.

He looked Shinjou in the eye. He observed those black eyes. And…

"Yes. Later, I will give you some celebratory items as well. Like a video game system."

A smile appeared on Shinjou's cheeks and he gave a pleased sigh.

"Let's get back to our room. That left arm makes things difficult, right? I can feed the cake to you."

"I just keep relying on you, don't I?"

"Eh? Don't worry about it. That's what I came here for."

"Fine then," agreed Sayama.

He followed Shinjou down the stairs and passed by a group of footsteps heading up.

Those footsteps belonged to the members of the art club.

A group of about twenty in casual clothes was going up to the roof.

They were likely going to sketch the scenery from there. They held drinks and snacks sold only at the school cafeteria as well as sketchbooks and boxes for art supplies.

With slow footsteps, their speaking and laughing voices continued upwards.

Sayama saw a certain girl at the tail end of the group.

It was Brunhild.

She was wearing her uniform and she stopped with an expressionless look when she lined up with Sayama.

She had a small bird on her shoulder and a black cat at her feet. She held a sketchbook and art supply box in her right hand. She held a small box with food for the bird in her left hand.

The others went on ahead, leaving only Sayama and Brunhild behind.

She realized Sayama was looking at the sketchbook and she averted her gaze somewhat.

"I thought I would try drawing Low-Gear's scenery starting today. …I finished the oil painting I was working on before."

"Yes, I saw it. It is hanging in a hallway of the faculty building, isn't it?"

"Yes," confirmed Brunhild and the bird tilted its head on her shoulder.

Silence followed.

After a few seconds, Brunhild opened her mouth while still looking away.

She tried to say something.

But some footsteps returned to the landing as if to stop her. They belonged to a girl in casual clothes.

“President, we’re going on ahead.”

Brunhild jumped in surprise, raised her head, and looked behind her.

“Okay,” she said with a nod before turning her back to Sayama.

But then she stopped moving.

Her pause was due to some music.

Organ music could be heard in the springtime air. Sayama and Brunhild recognized the song.

It was Silent Night.

"What…?" muttered Brunhild and the girl on the landing smiled.

"President, have you never heard this? It's because you always close yourself up in the art room. Whenever he has a break, old man Siegfried from the Kinugasa Library plays that song. Apparently, he started two years ago."

Sayama saw Brunhild's back tremble.

But that was all.

She continued up the stairs.

"…"

She silently climbed the stairs. With the black cat and small bird with her, she walked up next to the girl who had called to her.

She turned around at the landing and Sayama continued watching her until she disappeared around the next flight of stairs.

He then made his way down the stairs without speaking.

Shinjou was waiting for him at the first floor entrance down below.

"What took you so long?" asked Shinjou when he saw him, but he was smiling.

However, as Sayama walked up next to him, Shinjou got a look at his face. The smile disappeared and he tilted his head.

"Sayama-kun?"

"What is it?" asked Sayama while continuing to walk.

"Well," said Shinjou while following him. "Did something sad happen?"

"Your sister probably knows. …I am sure she will tell you one day."

Saying nothing more, Sayama wrapped his arm around the shoulder of the person walking next to him.

"Ah…" said Shinjou, but he did not resist.

Sayama took a breath and drew Shinjou in closer.

He could feel the warmth and softness of Shinjou's body, but having Shinjou entrust his body to him like that gave Sayama a certain thought.

…This is a most welcome thing.

Sayama looked up at the sky as he walked. Cherry blossoms scattered like snow through the blue sky.

"School begins again tomorrow."

"Can we all be together again someday?"

Shinjou nodded in his arm and he felt a small squeezing in his chest.

While thinking on those two things, Sayama looked even further up into the sky.

Had he managed to do something?

Afterword

Here is the second half. Referring to a novel as “1-B” feels completely unprecedented, but I just wanted to write more and more no matter how much I wrote. I think I will continue like this, so please bear with me.

Now for a bit of information about the novel.

The derivations of the hymn Silent Night based on the original German that number in the triple digits. People sing translations in dozens of languages. This book used one of those derivations and the translation was made from there as well, so do not treat it as the real one. The history behind all this is interesting, so you might want to look into all that.

When you think about it, sixty years goes by really fast . I was born thirty years after the war and my father personally experienced it, but a lot the readers of this book are from a generation that never knew the war. Now that I think about it, a lot of you were probably born after the Gulf War… That’s right. When I think about it even further, students these days (2004) were born during the age of the Mega Drive. …You’re the Mega Drive Generation. (Not really.)

Anyway, let's get to my chat with a friend.

"Okay, give me your commentary on the second half."

"You can't just lick it, you know?"

"Bzz. Too bad. There was no licking involved. It was only grabbed and pulled!"

"Kwah! Dammit. So you found out I haven't read it!! And what was with that suspicious last sentence?"

"Come back after actually reading it. I'll be nice, so listen carefully: Get lost, you idiot."

"You're being forceful today. At any rate, I skimmed through it and read the important parts."

"What parts did you read?"

"The afterword."

"Hey! Someone implant something in this liar's head!"

"Give me an X-ray vision chip if you can. Man, talking about implants really takes me back. When I was in high school, the guy sitting behind me collapsed and stabbed

me in the neck with his mechanical pencil. I had the lead implanted in me."

"It's going to reach your brain the day after tomorrow and you'll start convulsing."

"No, it won't. But that isn't all. In elementary school, this one guy stabbed pencil lead in his arm to make a tattoo of Doraem*n. Once he grew up, Doraem*n's face got really long and horse like. Doraem*n's design has a lot of space below the nose."

"That isn't something you would want people to know ."

"No. He didn't swim in the pool during high school."

"This chat has veered away from the novel and toward painful stories from the past."

"What's wrong with that? The people reading this will be in that stage of their lives. I'm sure there will be one person bearing a tattoo that keeps growing. Talking about the mistakes of our younger days is a good thing."

I'm not sure it's quite that good a thing.

Come to think of it, I set up a website. Here's the URL:

http://www.din.or.jp/~arm/

Satoyasu who I have draw for me also has a site. Here's the URL:

http://www.din.or.jp/~fnitt/

And finally, there's the site for Tenky, the company I work for. Here's the URL:

http://tenky.co.jp/

I just finished proofreading while listening to Zabadak 's Michishio no Yoru which I used as my background music while writing this second half of the novel.

Afterword

Omake Land

Satoyasu.

“Who exactly began it?”

I believe I will think about that sort of thing once more.

Now, I want to hurry on to the next one.

March 2003. A morning of delicious ice cream.

-Kawakami Minoru

Notes

1. ↑ This is the literal meaning of the kanji for the name that can be read as Tenkyou, Amayoshi, or Amayasu.
2. ↑ The Japanese word for contract is written with the kanji 約 which means promise and the kanji which can be broken down into the kanji for great (), the kanji for master (), and the kanji for sword ().
3. ↑ The first kanji of Kazami means wind.
4. ↑ The Japanese word for sincerity (誠) can be broken down into the kanji used here to mean words (), formed (), from (), sun (), and heart ().